

Business Communication Pocket Guide

Ellen Jovin

Essential Grammar for Business

The Foundation of Good Writing

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N I C H O L A S B R E A L E Y
P U B L I S H I N G

B O S T O N • L O N D O N

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Introduction

The Foundation of Good Writing

Grammar has a bad reputation. It is often regarded as dull, dry, mysterious, and frustrating. That is an unfortunate perspective. Gaining a deeper understanding of language and its structure can in fact be an exciting and rewarding activity. It is certainly a valuable one, with many practical professional benefits.

After all, a solid grasp of grammar is the foundation on which good writing rests. Good grammar is not by itself a guarantee of good writing, but good writing cannot exist without it.

The purpose of this small book is to provide guidance to professionals perplexed by questions about the proper placement of the comma, or the nature of dangling modifiers, or the difference between *who* and *whom*. With a better understanding of the building blocks of language, you will be better equipped to focus on other ingredients of good writing, such as content, clarity, and style.

Besides reviewing the grammar vocabulary necessary to a discussion of grammatical principles—verbs, pronouns, and clauses, for example—this guide covers sentence structure, the rules of punctuation, and common problems in grammar and usage. It does not provide an exhaustive survey of these topics; instead, it focuses on the grammatical issues most relevant for business communications.

By improving your grasp of English and its structures, you will be better equipped to inform and persuade others in both writing and speech. Good grammar is a powerful tool, at work and in life.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ellen L. Jovin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, stylized 'E' and 'J'.

Chapter 1

Parts of Speech

A basic knowledge of the parts of speech makes it easier to follow discussions of English grammar and to understand the conventions of standard English grammar. This first chapter introduces the fundamental characteristics of these eight word categories: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. If you already know this information, skip ahead to [Chapter 2](#) and use this chapter for reference when you need it.

The Eight Parts of Speech

- nouns
- pronouns
- verbs
- adjectives
- adverbs
- prepositions
- conjunctions
- interjections

As you read through these descriptions, keep in mind that the same word can be a different part of speech depending on how it is used. For example, the word *well* can function as a noun, adverb, adjective, verb, or interjection. To determine part of speech, you will often need to examine how a word is functioning in a particular sentence.

Noun

The **well** ran dry.

Adverb

Ramón did **well** in his TV interview.

Adjective

Laila is not **well** today.

Verb

When I criticize Robin's work, tears **well** up in his eyes.

Interjection

Well! I've never been called *that* before.

1.1 Nouns

A noun refers to a person, place, thing, or idea. If you can perceive something through one of your five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch—it is probably a noun. Examples include:

thinker	desk	noodle
notebook	stapler	medal
thunder	radish	car
courtroom	table	sushi
office	elevator	sandpaper

Other nouns describe abstract ideas that cannot be perceived through the five senses. The word *idea* is an abstract noun! Here are some other examples:

integrity	arrogance
belief	reason
reputation	information

justice
creativity

culture
motivation

There are two special types of nouns worth noting here. The first is the **collective noun**, which describes a plural concept but is singular in form. Examples include:

crowd
staff
faculty
panel
committee

team
board
couple
group
jury

Collective nouns create challenges with subject-verb agreement, which you will read about in [6.1](#).

Another special noun type is the **proper noun**, which refers to a specific person, place, thing, or idea. *Joan Didion*, *New York City*, and the *American Bar Association* are all examples of proper nouns.

1.2 Pronouns

A pronoun usually refers back to or replaces a noun or another pronoun. In the following sentence, for instance, the pronoun *it* refers back to the noun *report*.

Rochelle gave the report to Axel, who read it during lunch.

The word *report* is the **antecedent** for *it*. You can think of the pronoun in part as a tool for convenience; after all, without it we would have to write:

Rochelle gave the report to Axel, who read the report during lunch.

Pronouns don't always act as surrogates for other words, however. If you think of pronouns as vague versions of

nouns, that may help you recognize them. Listed here are some common pronouns:

I	which	no one
you	who	anybody
he	that	anyone
she	these	something
it	those	whoever
we	some	one
they	each	whom
me	everyone	neither
us	everybody	themselves
ours	nothing	either

1.3 Verbs

Verbs usually describe existence or action and can be divided into three broad categories: action, linking, and auxiliary (or helping) verbs. Understanding these categories can help you recognize verbs more easily in a sentence.

1.3.1 Action Verbs

As their name suggests, action verbs generally describe action. Examples include:

select	meet
write	invoke
invest	arrive
grumble	employ
sell	speak
react	advertise

Not all action verbs, however, describe perceptible action. For instance, in the sentence *Martha thought about the consequences*, the verb *thought* is an action verb even if Martha is not moving.

Action verbs can be **transitive** or **intransitive**. A transitive verb requires a **direct object**; an intransitive verb cannot take a direct object. Consider these sentences:

The attorney questioned her client.
The attorney strode swiftly down the hallway.

In the first sentence, *client* is a direct object because it receives the action of the verb *questioned*, and *questioned* is a transitive verb. In the second sentence, there is no object to receive the action of the verb *strode*. In this case, *strode* is intransitive.

1.3.2 Linking Verbs

Linking verbs describe a state of being. The most common linking verb is *to be*. Forms include the underlined verbs below:

To Be

I am awake.

She is impatient.

You are ready.

I need to be at work by five.

I was unprepared.

They were in the conference room.

I will be late.

Many people believe that being late is a sign of disrespect.

He has been early every day this week.

Other examples of linking verbs include *seem* and *become*.

Rob seems happy.
Rob became frustrated.

Verbs such as *appear*, *feel*, *look*, *sound*, and *smell* can all be either linking verbs or action verbs, depending on how they are used in a sentence. For instance, in the following sentence, *appeared* is a linking verb because it describes a state of being rather than an action.

The manager appeared tired.

In this next sentence, however, *appeared* is an action verb because it describes an occurrence; something happens in the sentence.

The manager appeared in the doorway.

1.3.3 Auxiliary Verbs

Auxiliary verbs are often called **helping verbs** because of the supportive role they play in a sentence. They help out—by accompanying the main verb in a clause (see [2.1](#)) and expressing subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle distinctions in meaning.

Examples of auxiliary verbs include:

be	can
do	could
have	may
might	should
must	will
shall	would

The following sentences show auxiliary verbs at work alongside main verbs.

Auxiliary Verbs • Main Verbs

They **have** *talked* to the chairman.

She **would have** *attended* the meeting if she **had** *caught* the earlier train.

I **can** *help* you.

Some auxiliary verbs can also be action or linking verbs, depending on how they are used. Here are two sentences containing *did*, the past tense of *to do*:

We did not participate in the meeting.

Jacques did the necessary paperwork by 5:00 p.m.

In the first sentence, *did* is an auxiliary verb, and *participate* is the main verb. In the second sentence, *did* is an action verb whose direct object is *paperwork*.

1.4 Adjectives

An adjective modifies a noun or pronoun. For example, in the following sentence, *pharmaceutical* is an adjective that describes the noun *executive*.

A pharmaceutical executive I know just donated \$100,000 to an educational charity.

Some people learned in school that the three articles—*a*, *an*, and *the*—are a subcategory of the larger universe of adjectives. Linguistically they are better categorized as *determiners*, but that discussion falls outside the scope of this book and will not affect our progress here.

The only definite article in English is *the*. The indefinite articles are *a* and *an*. Like their more descriptive adjective

counterparts, they work in combination with nouns and pronouns.

Article • Adjective • Modified Noun or Pronoun

a *neon* sign
a *large* company
the *blue* notebook
the *idealistic* students
the *first* one
an *exhausted, grumpy* intern
the *streaming* video
a *successful* presentation

1.5 Adverbs

Adverbs can modify any of three parts of speech: verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. They often end in the letters *ly*—for example, *gradually*, *regularly*, *languidly*, *enthusiastically*, and so on.

Some adverbs tell you how quickly something was done:

The reporter typed **swiftly**.

- *Swiftly* modifies the verb *typed*.

Dr. Smith spoke **slowly**.

- *Slowly* modifies the verb *spoke*.

Others tell you degree:

The supervisor was **extremely** disappointed.

- *Extremely* modifies the adjective *disappointed*.

They wrote the speech **very quickly**.

- *Very* modifies the adverb *quickly*, which in turn modifies the verb *wrote*.

Adverbs can also describe how often something takes place, when it takes place, where it takes place, and more. Other examples of adverbs include:

almost
also
frequently
never
not
now

often
only
quite
sometimes
today
too

Not all words that end in *ly* are adverbs. For instance, *friendly* and *costly* are adjectives and, like other adjectives, can modify only nouns and pronouns.

the friendly store manager a costly mistake

1.6 Prepositions

Prepositions are relationship words. They typically introduce groups of words called **prepositional phrases**, examples of which are listed below. In each of the phrases, the preposition appears in boldface, and the **object of the preposition**—the noun or pronoun that follows the preposition—appears in italics.

Preposition • Object of the Preposition

at the *door*
in the *neighborhood*
from the *CEO*
by the *journalist*
to the human resources *manager*
on the *desk*
until the 2:00 p.m. *meeting*
for *everyone*
during the *day*

As you can see, prepositions are often short words, although longer words such as *throughout* and *underneath* can also be prepositions.

1.7 Conjunctions

Conjunctions link together words or groups of words. There are three main types of conjunctions: coordinating, subordinating, and correlative.

1.7.1 Coordinating Conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions combine sentence elements of roughly equal importance. There are seven coordinating conjunctions in all. Because punctuation rules vary according to which type of conjunction is being used, as you will see once you get to future chapters, it can be helpful to memorize them using the memory aid *fanboys*:

for
and
nor
but
or
yet
so

These are like light glue combining elements of similar weight and emphasis.

He fired Joe, but he immediately regretted it.

- *But* links what could be two entire sentences—or two independent clauses, to be precise. More on those in [Chapter 2](#).

The class will be attended by managers and directors.

- The word *and* links the nouns *managers* and *directors*.

I need to learn Excel, so I have signed up for a class.

- *So* links what could be two sentences.

1.7.2 Subordinating Conjunctions

Unlike their coordinating conjunction counterparts, subordinating conjunctions do not combine sentence elements of roughly equal weight; instead, they subordinate one idea to another.

Subordinating conjunctions introduce grammatical elements known as **dependent clauses**, which will be discussed in more detail in [Chapter 2](#). There are dozens of subordinating conjunctions, but common examples include:

after	if
although	since
as	so that
as if	unless
as though	until
because	when
before	whenever
even if	whereas
even though	while

As you can see, some subordinating conjunctions are two words (e.g., *even though*); most are just one. *So that* is often written without the *that*, as in this sentence:

I took a taxi so (that) I could get there on time.

So that has the sense of *in order to*. It is different from the coordinating conjunction *so* (introduced in [1.7.1](#)), which shows cause-effect and is also punctuated differently.

It was late, so I took a taxi.

1.7.3 Correlative Conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions work in pairs. Indicated below in boldface are some common examples:

Either Jane **or** Jim will attend the meeting.

Neither Jane **nor** Jim will attend the meeting.

Today the company announced **not only** a new product line **but also** a new hiring program.

A cautionary note: *either* and *neither* are not always conjunctions. They can also sometimes be adjectives or pronouns, depending on how they are used in a sentence.

Neither as Adjective

Neither approach is acceptable.

Neither as Pronoun

Neither of the approaches is acceptable.

1.8 Interjections

Interjections are short utterances or exclamations, such as:

Oh.
Hurray!
Aha!
Zounds!
Yay!

Interjections don't come up much in business writing (unless your email style is particularly energetic or you work for a comic book company), but you now know the eight parts of speech. Every word in the English language fits into at least one of these eight categories.

Chapter 2

Sentence Structure

This chapter describes the fundamentals of sentence structure and introduces various sentence types. Understanding the basic architecture of your sentences can help you become a more skilled sentence stylist, avoid run-ons, and enliven your writing!

2.1 Dependent and Independent Clauses

Let's start with the building blocks of sentences: clauses. A clause is a group of grammatically related words containing a subject and a predicate.

A **subject** is a noun or pronoun that performs the action in a clause or that the clause is about.

The **attorney** called her client to set up a meeting.

The **economy** was shrinking.

The former **CEO** will turn 100 next month.

A **predicate** consists of one or more verbs and accompanying modifiers.

Subject • Predicate

The **foreman** *helped the workers to safety.*

Rene Singer's new **book** *has won three business writing prizes.*

Amy, Marty, and Olga *formed a committee to evaluate the applicants.*

The third sentence above contains a compound subject consisting of three proper nouns: *Amy, Marty, and Olga*.

In addition, all three of the preceding examples are **independent clauses**. That means they can stand alone as complete sentences.

A second clause type is called **dependent (or subordinate)**. Dependent clauses begin with a

subordinating conjunction, as in these examples:

Subordinating Conjunction • **Subject** • *Predicate*

because **it** *was snowing*

when **Mr. Rogers** *returned to work*

as **you** *like it*

Although dependent clauses contain a subject and a predicate, they cannot stand alone as sentences; if they do, they are usually called **sentence fragments**, a common type of grammatical error. They can, however, be combined with independent clauses to create complete sentences, as you will see in the next section.

2.2 Sentence Types

There are three main sentence types, described below: simple, compound, and complex.

2.2.1 Simple Sentences

A simple sentence consists of a single independent clause, as in:

Doris greeted me at the entrance.

The company hired 30 new employees last quarter.

The University of Chicago is located in Hyde Park.

2.2.2 Compound Sentences

A compound sentence consists of two or more independent clauses. The clauses can be combined in various ways.

In the following sentence, for example, the coordinating conjunction *and* combines two independent clauses.

The seminar starts at 9:00 a.m., and lunch should arrive by noon.

Although subordinating conjunctions are part of their dependent clauses, the *and* above does not count as part of either independent clause.

In the next example, a semicolon combines two independent clauses to form another type of compound sentence.

The company hired 30 new employees last quarter; it also opened a new factory.

A third example of a compound sentence, below, contains three independent clauses, each indicated with brackets. The coordinating conjunction *but* combines the first two, and the coordinating conjunction *so* combines the second and third.

(Aaron originally disapproved of the plan to expand the cafeteria], but [his co-workers all supported it], so [he decided to vote in favor of the idea).

2.2.3 Complex Sentences

A complex sentence consists of at least one independent clause combined with at least one dependent clause. The following examples illustrate various structural possibilities:

Dependent Clause + *Independent Clause*

If it snows, the company will cancel the outing.

Independent Clause + Dependent Clause

The company will cancel the outing if it snows.

Dependent Clause + *Two Independent Clauses*

Because Roger had to pick up his children from school, he submitted his article early; unfortunately, he didn't have time to proofread it.

2.3 Run-on Sentences

A run-on sentence is a major grammatical error occurring when a writer joins independent clauses with nothing but air, as in:

Incorrect

The proposal is on its way you should have it by noon.

The caterer was too expensive I decided not to order refreshments for the meeting.

The caterer was too expensive therefore I decided not to order refreshments for the meeting.

As you can see, a run-on can be short or long. It can even include an unpunctuated connecting word like *therefore* and still remain a run-on. Below are some options for revision (other revisions are possible).

Correct

The proposal is on its way. You should have it by noon.

The caterer was too expensive, so I decided not to order refreshments for the meeting.

The caterer was too expensive; therefore, I decided not to order refreshments for the meeting.

Avoid run-ons, even in the quickest and most casual of emails and instant messages at work.

Many working adults who claim they write run-ons do not actually write run-ons. What they mean is that they write sentences that run on and on, but that is a problem with excessive, hyperventilation-inducing length, not grammar. *Run-on* does not mean a never-ending sentence; it is a specific grammatical error, as described here.

Chapter 3

Punctuation

Punctuation may sometimes suffer in this age of social media and texting, but for workplace communication, it still matters! Punctuation tells the reader where to stop and start, as well as how words and phrases relate to one another. This chapter covers the rules of punctuation as they arise most frequently in workplace settings.

3.1 Periods

This section covers just three small points about periods. For rules on placement of periods around quotation marks, see [4.2.2](#). For rules on spacing after periods, see [5.3](#).

3.1.1 In Other Words: Full Stops

Outside of the United States, the period is often referred to as a *full stop*. If you work internationally, you might hear this term a lot. If you hear it a lot, you might want to use it yourself with overseas colleagues who are using it, because *period* sounds strange to people who use *full stop*. That is entirely up to you, though.

3.1.2 Periods After Abbreviations Ending in a Period

If you end a sentence with an abbreviation that already ends with a period, do not add a second period.

Incorrect

Today the assistant vice president visited XYZ, Inc..

Zena received a shipment of apples, oranges, etc..

Let's start the phone call at 8 a.m..

Correct

Today the assistant vice president visited XYZ, Inc.

Zena received a shipment of apples, oranges, etc.

Let's start the phone call at 8 a.m.

3.1.3 Periods in Times of Day

If you are using a 12-hour clock, as in the US, you can indicate times of morning or afternoon in a variety of ways. A widely accepted format is lowercase letters with periods, as shown here.

5:00 p.m.
5 p.m.
11:00 a.m.
11 a.m.

The following options are also in use.

5:00 PM (small caps)
5pm
5:00 PM

The most important thing is to be consistent in the format you use.

3.2 Commas

You can't just place commas where there are pauses. If that were true, no one would ever make a comma mistake.

In addition, some comma decisions are flexible; some are not. The recommendations included here are not exhaustive, but they do seek to cover the key sources of comma confusion in business communications. It is easier to understand comma rules if you understand the fundamental building blocks of sentences, so if you are uncertain of those, please read [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#) before you proceed.

3.2.1 The Oxford Comma

Use commas to separate items in a series, as in the following examples:

I ordered salad, spaghetti, and orange juice.

The company recently hired 40 more salespeople, added two new business lines, and expanded its call center in Roanoke.

We won't have time to stop in West Virginia, New York, or Rhode Island this time.

In each of these examples, a comma appears before the conjunction preceding the last item in the series. It is a comma with its own name: the Oxford comma.

Many people were taught in school that the Oxford comma is unnecessary, and it is in fact acceptable to omit it if you prefer that style. Journalists, for example, often leave it out in accordance with Associated Press guidelines, which say to omit it unless it is necessary for clarity. In business writing it is also frequently absent, as in these amended examples from above:

I ordered salad, spaghetti and orange juice.

The company recently hired 40 more salespeople, added two new business lines and expanded its call center in Roanoke.

We won't have time to stop in West Virginia, New York or Rhode Island this time.

However, because the omission of the final comma sometimes leads to confusion, the preference of many writers is to keep it. Especially if you write complex things with complex sentences and lists, you may wish to use it. Oxford commas appear to be more common in fields like law and management consulting, for example, where complex sentences abound. This book consistently uses the Oxford comma.

Whatever choice you make, try to be consistent. One caveat, though: even if you generally prefer to omit the final

comma, you should include it whenever there is any ambiguity about the boundaries between the items in a series. For instance, ambiguity may occur when there is an *and* within one of the items, as in the following sentence:

I ordered salad, spaghetti and meatballs, and orange juice.

The second item in the series—*spaghetti and meatballs*—contains an *and*. Therefore, a comma should appear before *and orange juice*; otherwise, the reader may need a fraction of a second to sort through the words *spaghetti and meatballs and orange juice* to figure out which items go together. Fractions of seconds can add up over the course of a document!

3.2.2 Commas Between Coordinate Clauses

A comma should generally appear before a coordinating conjunction that combines two independent clauses (known in this case as coordinate clauses). In the following examples, clauses are indicated with brackets.

(I bought paper at the office-supplies store), and (Joan began binding the report).

(Last year the community college began offering special night classes for employees of local businesses), but (very few people have signed up).

Sometimes if the clauses are very short, you may omit the comma.

(The phone beeped) and (Rex jumped).

However, it would also be correct to insert a comma after *beeped*. The choice in the sentence above is really a stylistic one.

3.2.3 Commas After Introductory Phrases

You will sometimes find a phrase—a group of related words—at the very beginning of a sentence. Generally a comma appears after an introductory phrase, especially if it consists of three or more words.

Before the opening session, anxious presenters fortified themselves with pastries and coffee.

Even very short introductory phrases can read better when they are followed by a comma.

In 1898, Manhattan and the Bronx merged with Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island to form modern-day New York City.

Many people report being taught that they should always add a comma after an introductory word or phrase. Compare these two sentences, identical except for a comma:

Recently, the company renovated its reception area and added a small weight room.

Recently the company renovated its reception area and added a small weight room.

If you put a comma after *recently*, that word naturally gets more emphasis—but that may not be what you want to emphasize. Both versions are perfectly fine. Commas after introductory words and phrases are often more about stylistic preferences than about rigid, unbreakable punctuation rules.

3.2.4 Commas with Parenthetical Words and Phrases

Sometimes a parenthetical word or phrase (parenthetical meaning that it is not essential to a sentence's main idea) will interrupt the flow of a sentence. In such cases, commas should precede and follow the interrupting word or expression, as in these examples:

Elaine did not, as a matter of fact, show up for the brainstorming session.

Bob is allergic to wheat and corn. He is not, however, allergic to rice or bran.

3.2.5 Commas with Appositives

Another type of interrupting expression is an **appositive**: a word or group of words that (1) essentially renames the noun or pronoun that precedes it or (2) describes it in a new way. Many appositives are set off with commas, as in this sentence:

My colleague, an accomplished pianist, is going to play for us at our upcoming staff retreat.

In this case, *an accomplished pianist* is the appositive—an alternative way to refer to the colleague.

In some cases, however, an appositive does not take a comma. The following sentences both include appositives and are both correct, but they mean two slightly different things:

My daughter, Magda, is a biologist.
My daughter Magda is a biologist.

Magda is the appositive in both examples. In each of the two sentences, the presence or absence of commas tells us how to interpret the sentence's meaning. In the first case, the commas around *Magda* tell us that the writer has just one daughter, and her name happens to be Magda.

With this type of appositive, called a **nonrestrictive appositive** (now say that five times fast!), you can think of the commas as indicating the nonessential nature of the information. If you take out the name *Magda*, the sentence still works—because there is only one daughter and there can therefore be no doubt about whom the sentence describes.

In the second sentence, the lack of commas indicates that the writer has more than one daughter. Here, *Magda* is a **restrictive appositive**, because it restricts the discussion to one specific daughter out of multiple daughters. Without the name, you wouldn't know which of the daughters the sentence referred to; the name is essential information. Do not use commas with restrictive appositives.

3.2.6 Commas with Relative Clauses

Relative clauses are a particular type of clause beginning with pronouns such as *who*, *which*, or *that*.

The manager rewarded the employees *who contributed most to the company's success*.

We passed by the old warehouse, *which had been abandoned 10 years earlier*.

Smith Collins is the firm *that Dave told you about the other day*.

One of the three sentences above includes a comma before the relative clause; the other two do not. In order to punctuate these clauses correctly, determine first whether you are working with a restrictive or a nonrestrictive relative clause.

Restrictive clauses are essential for grammatical and logical completeness. **Nonrestrictive clauses**, in contrast, can be omitted without any significant loss of meaning and without disruption to the grammatical structure of a sentence. That doesn't mean the nonrestrictive clause doesn't matter or is unimportant. It just means it is noncritical.

Of the three sentences in the preceding examples, the first and third contain restrictive clauses. Look again at the first:

The manager rewarded the employees *who contributed most to the company's success*.

Here the clause *who contributed most to the company's success* restricts the class of all employees to those who most helped to ensure that the company would succeed. If the clause were deleted, the sentence's meaning would be destroyed.

The same holds true for the third sentence:

Smith Collins is the firm *that Dave told you about the other day*.

Smith Collins is the firm does not at all preserve the sense of the original sentence. The italicized restrictive clause is critical to its fundamental meaning. Do not place commas before restrictive relative clauses.

The sentence about the warehouse, however, contains a nonrestrictive clause. Note the comma.

We passed by the old warehouse, *which had been abandoned 10 years earlier*.

The clause adds information about the noun or pronoun that precedes it—in this case, *warehouse*—but removing it would have no significant impact on either grammar or meaning. It's like saying, "We passed by the old warehouse, and oh, by the way, that warehouse was abandoned 10 years ago!" Use a comma before nonrestrictive relative clauses. It shows they are technically removable, even if you don't actually *want* to remove them and even if removing them would mess up your writing plans.

People frequently use *which* in cases where others would only use *that*. For example:

Smith Collins is the firm that I read about in the newspaper today.

or

Smith Collins is the firm which I read about in the newspaper today.

You could also simply delete the relative pronoun and end up with this:

Smith Collins is the firm I read about in the newspaper today.

In the US there remains considerable support for a *that-which* distinction restricting the use of *that* to restrictive (i.e., essential) relative clauses and *which* to nonrestrictive (i.e., nonessential) relative clauses. Although this book does not use *which* as a restrictive relative pronoun, it is not incorrect to do so. However, observing this distinction can help ensure that there is no misunderstanding about your intended meaning, especially with an American audience. See [7.7](#) for additional information on interpreting relative clauses.

If you distinguish carefully between *that* and *which* in your writing, your relative clauses should usually be punctuated as follows:

- *that*-clause: no preceding comma
- *which*-clause: preceding comma
- *who*-clause: preceding comma if clause contains nonessential information; no preceding comma if clause contains essential information

Below are examples of both restrictive and nonrestrictive *who*-clauses:

The professor scolded the students who were late.

The professor scolded the students, who were late.

In the sentence without the comma, all the punctual students escaped the scolding. In the one with the comma, all the students were late and all were scolded. In the second sentence, you could remove the restrictive clause (i.e., *who were late*) without destroying the basic meaning of the sentence, which is not true of the first, comma-free sentence.

3.2.7 Commas Between Adjectives

When nouns or pronouns are preceded by multiple adjectives, you may need a comma to separate at least one of the adjectives from the next one. Consider these examples:

a **talented young** attorney
a **talented, articulate** attorney

The first example contains no comma between *talented* and the second adjective; the second does. How do you know whether to include a comma?

Here's a trick: try reading the phrase with an *and* between the adjectives. If it doesn't sound right—and *a talented and young attorney* does not sound right—then no comma is necessary. If adding the *and* sounds reasonable—and *a talented and articulate attorney* does—then do insert a comma.

If you have three adjectives in a row, take them two at a time. The following phrase contains three consecutive adjectives before the word *attorney*.

a talented, articulate young attorney

There is a comma between *talented* and *articulate* because, as noted previously, the phrase *a talented and articulate attorney* sounds reasonable.

There is no comma between *articulate* and *young* because *an articulate and young attorney* sounds, well, weird.

3.2.8 Commas Before Quotations

If a quotation is a complete sentence, place a comma after introductory words such as *she says* or *they write*. For example:

Wattley writes, “The COO has failed this firm.”

If the quotation is not a complete sentence, punctuate your sentence the same way you would if there were no quotation marks; in most cases, no comma will be necessary.

Wattley writes that the COO “has failed this firm.”

Please see [4.2](#) for additional details regarding punctuation placement around quotation marks.

3.2.9 Commas with Dates and Places

If a full date (month, day, and year) appears in a sentence, punctuate it as follows in American English:

She was born on March 4, 1992, in Georgia.

If only the month and year appear, no commas are necessary.

She was born in March 1992 in Georgia.

In British English, it is common to see *4 March 1992* and *4 March*—without commas.

If a city and state appear mid-sentence, punctuate them as in this example:

She was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in March 1992.

If you take away the city or state, though, remove the commas. For example:

She was born in Atlanta in March 1992.
She was born in Georgia in March 1992.

3.2.10 Commas with Inc. and Jr.

Inc. and *Jr.* are often used without any commas. However, if you do decide to put a comma before *Inc.* or *Jr.*, you should also include a comma afterwards. Below are some samples of correct and incorrect punctuation.

Incorrect

XYZ, Inc. has lost its focus.

Tim Smith, Jr. has lost his focus.

Correct

XYZ Inc. has lost its focus.

XYZ, Inc., has lost its focus.

Tim Smith Jr. has lost his focus.

Tim Smith, Jr., has lost his focus.

A good practice is to follow a company's preferences as reflected on their website or in marketing collateral, or a person's individual preferences for his name, but it is common to go comma-free.

3.2.11 Commas with Dependent Clauses

If a complex sentence (see [2.2.3](#)) begins with a dependent clause, insert a comma between the dependent clause and a subsequent independent clause.

Whenever we finish a project, we celebrate at a local Greek restaurant.

However, if the clauses are flipped so that the independent clause comes first and the dependent second, then no comma is necessary.

We celebrate at a local Greek restaurant whenever we finish a project.

Usually if the dependent clause follows the independent clause, you do not need a comma.

There are exceptions, though—for example, when you are working with a dependent clause that contrasts with the preceding independent clause. Such clauses begin with subordinating conjunctions such as *although*, *even though*, and *whereas*.

The firm issued a public statement supporting the CFO, even though some partners had argued against it.

One IT consultant advised me to set up a new backup system, whereas another insisted it was unnecessary.

Germany would be a wonderful place for us to do business, although none of our employees currently speak German.

There are also some cases where you will need a comma before *because* or *since*.

I hope you get fired, because you are a jerk.

Are you hoping the person will be fired specifically because he is a jerk? Or are you hoping, because you think he is a jerk, that he will be fired? The comma makes it clear that the latter is the intended meaning.

Below are two additional samples where a comma is necessary before the subordinating conjunction.

The employees aren't very hopeful, since the current situation is grim.

The subject of the sentence cannot be *products*, because *products* is the object of a prepositional phrase.

3.2.12 Comma Splices

A comma splice is a sentence error occurring when a writer combines two independent clauses with a comma and nothing more. Avoid comma splices! The following sentence is a comma splice.

Incorrect

The economic situation was dire, we decided to shut two stores.

One easy way to fix this problem is to replace the comma with a semicolon. Another simple option is to add a conjunction.

Correct

The economic situation was dire; we decided to shut two stores.

The economic situation was dire, so we decided to shut two stores.

3.2.13 Commas with As Well As

Sometimes phrases with *as well as* (or *along with*, too) are preceded with commas, and sometimes they aren't. In some cases, the comma helps make a sentence clearer and more readable, but the choice is often subjective.

The only difference between these two sentences is the comma.

I read Carl and Lois's report as well as Donna and Dillon's proposal.

I read Carl and Lois's report, as well as Donna and Dillon's proposal.

Either of these would be acceptable, but because the ideas are short and simple, the added comma may feel like too much to some.

Small changes can affect punctuation decisions for *as well as*. Except for the addition of two words—*have now*—the following two sentences are identical to the two sentences above.

I have now read Carl and Lois's report as well as Donna and Dillon's proposal.

I have now read Carl and Lois's report, as well as Donna and Dillon's proposal.

The small additions make the comma a bit more useful and stylistically desirable. There is greater complexity with

the additional content, and the comma helps divide up the ideas. Again, though, both options are acceptable.

3.2.14 Commas Before Too

Comma use before the word *too* at the end of a sentence seems to be declining. However, both options shown here are in active use; both are acceptable.

The daffodils are blooming, too.

The daffodils are blooming too.

Careful writers might even choose a comma before *too* in one sentence in a document and then skip the comma before *too* in another. That, too, is acceptable. Consistency is desirable, but some sentences may seem to need such a comma more than others.

3.3 Semicolons

The semicolon signals a more significant pause than a comma, but a less significant pause than a period. Following are three common semicolon applications.

3.3.1 Semicolons Between Independent Clauses

The most common use of the semicolon is as a connector between two independent clauses. For instance:

His flight was canceled; he cursed his luck.

What is the difference between the sentence above and this next example?

His flight was canceled. He cursed his luck.

The period calls for a more complete stop than the semicolon does. Use a semicolon when the relationship

between the two clauses is a close one. In this example, the writer could use either the semicolon or the period, depending on stylistic preferences.

3.3.2 Semicolons with Conjunctive Adverbs

A particular type of adverb, known as a *conjunctive adverb*, sometimes appears as a transitional word between independent clauses. Examples include:

therefore	nevertheless
furthermore	on the other hand
however	consequently
nonetheless	moreover
in addition	in fact

In business writing, conjunctive adverbs are often punctuated erratically and incorrectly. The following examples illustrate incorrect and correct punctuation.

Incorrect

The work is exciting therefore the human resources department receives many resumes.

The work is exciting therefore, the human resources department receives many resumes.

The work is exciting, therefore the human resources department receives many resumes.

The work is exciting, therefore, the human resources department receives many resumes.

Correct

The work is exciting; therefore, the human resources department receives many resumes.

Incorrect

The employee was constantly late, however his manager never reprimanded him.

Correct

The employee was constantly late; however, his manager never reprimanded him.

In addition to the semicolon preceding *therefore* and *however* in the correct examples above, note the comma that follows. In both of these examples, the semicolon could be replaced with a period; that choice is a stylistic one. A period indicates a bigger break than a semicolon.

Correct

The work is exciting. Therefore, the human resources department receives many resumes.

The employee was constantly late. However, his manager never reprimanded him.

3.3.3 Semicolons in Complex Lists

As explained in [3.2.1](#), you should generally use commas to separate items in a series. For example:

I ordered paper, paper clips, and paperweights.

or

I ordered paper, paper clips and paperweights.

However, when one or more of the items in the series include one or more commas, you may want to use semicolons rather than commas to separate the items. See how the following sentence looks a bit messy and confusing?

Not Ideal

He had previously written about the gas, electricity, and paper markets, the healthcare industry, and an assortment of regulatory and enforcement agencies.

By using semicolons between the items, you will help your reader easily identify where one item ends and the

next begins. For example:

Better!

He had previously written about the gas, electricity, and paper markets; the healthcare industry; and an assortment of regulatory and enforcement agencies.

Make sure you use a semicolon before the final *and*. It may seem counterintuitive to have a semicolon before an *and*, but in a complex list, it is essential, because it tells the reader where the boundary between the second-to-last item and the last item is.

3.4 Colons

Use a colon when what follows the colon amplifies or further explains what precedes it. For example:

Terry had two goals that summer: to learn French and improve her Chinese.

In the sentence above, what appears before the colon—*two goals that summer*—is equivalent to what appears after it (*to learn French and improve her Chinese*). The colon adds dramatic impact by creating suspense; the reader must wait until the end of the sentence to find out what Terry's goals were.

In this next example, the colon adds punch by deferring the central revelation of the sentence:

The committee concluded that responsibility for the scandal rested with just one person: the CEO.

Because the colon can be high-impact, be careful not to overuse it.

In many cases, the colon sets up a kind of equivalency. For instance, if you look just to the left of the colon in the previous example, you see the words *just one person*. Look

just to the right of the colon and you see that person identified. If this were a math problem, you could put an equals sign where the colon stands.

The same goes for the sentence below:

The company introduced several new products:

lawn chairs, beach blankets, and sun umbrellas.

The *several new products* are equivalent to the *lawn chairs, beach blankets, and sun umbrellas*. But what if we added the word *including* after *products*? The following sentence illustrates a misuse of the colon, one that is very common in business writing:

Incorrect

The company introduced several new products, including: lawn chairs, beach blankets, and sun umbrellas.

The presence of a list is not by itself enough to justify a colon. For one thing, we no longer have roughly equivalent ideas to the left and right of the colon. As a general rule, do not use a colon after a form of the verb *include*. In the incorrect sentence above, no colon is necessary; it should be deleted.

Correct

The company introduced several new products, including lawn chairs, beach blankets, and sun umbrellas.

See [5.2](#) for information on colons preceding bulleted lists.

Less frequently, you will see colons used to introduce a whole sentence.

Your staff will understand: we simply can't have minors at this event.

You could use a semicolon instead of the colon there, but the feeling would be different. A semicolon weights the two

ideas equally, whereas with the colon, the first queues up the delivery of the second and kind of punches you with it.

3.5 Dashes

Compared to the guidelines for the preceding punctuation marks, the rules for the dash (also sometimes referred to as the *em dash*) are a little more freewheeling. However, be careful not to overuse it or abuse your dash privileges.

3.5.1 Dashes for Clarity

Use a dash to set off information when the usual commas might not be clear enough.

Confusing

I called my mother, a former principal, and my sister.

The sentence above is ambiguous.

Let's say the mother is the former principal alluded to, yet because of the punctuation, it seems that the writer has in fact called three people: (1) Mom, (2) a former principal, and (3) a sister.

If you wanted to, you could use a dash to fix this problem.

Clear

I called my mother—a former principal—and my sister.

Now it is clear that the mother is the former principal and that only two people received phone calls.

In the following example, too, the dash clears up potential confusion.

Confusing

We invited three CEOs, Mary Laughlin, Ana Gomez, and David Lee, to the conference.

Clear

We invited three CEOs—Mary Laughlin, Ana Gomez, and David Lee—to the conference.

Although you could in theory use parentheses to enclose the names, you might not want to minimize them that way. (See [4.1](#) for more information on parentheses.) It makes more sense to set off the names with dashes, because that highlights them rather than hiding them.

3.5.2 Dashes for Drama

The dash can also be used for dramatic emphasis in various contexts. For example:

The fire destroyed their house, their car, and all their belongings—but it could not destroy their innate optimism.

Normally that dash would be a comma, but the dash adds power to the surprise ending of the sentence.

Sometimes it can be difficult to choose between a colon and a dash. Where a colon is unquestionably suitable, you might consider using that rather than the dash. Don't underestimate the quiet power of a smart, well-placed colon. Dashes are in danger of being overused as all-purpose punctuation; colons aren't.

For example, you can use a dash in the following sentence, but the structure is ideally suited to the colon.

Jordan has just three ambitions—a good job, a nice home, and seven children.

Jordan has just three ambitions: a good job, a nice home, and seven children.

However, this is a matter of personal punctuation taste. You decide!

3.5.3 En Dashes

The en dash is a slightly shorter version of the dash shown in the preceding sections.

Here is a lineup of three different horizontal lines people use in writing:

- hyphen
- en dash
- em dash (or simply *dash*)

These will look slightly different in different fonts.

When you hear the word *dash*, you can usually assume that means an em dash. In business writing, the en dash is pretty rare, but might appear in cases such as these:

- ranges of numbers, dates, times, etc.

The gathering will take place on Friday afternoon, 5:00 p.m.–7:00 p.m., in the building’s lobby.

At our event Friday, we had 75–80 attendees.

- contrast or connection between two words

The Montreal–Quebec train route is beautiful.

The JFK–LAX flight has been canceled.

I am inspired by the closeness of your mother–daughter relationship.

Many businesspeople would use a hyphen instead of an en dash in the examples above, especially in email. Unless you are working on an important formal document, that is usually going to be fine—but you never know when a correctly used en dash might impress!

Whether you employ an en dash or use a hyphen instead, the following sentence is wrong.

Incorrect

The meeting will run from 5 p.m.–8 p.m.

In a range, you cannot use the word *from* in combination with an en dash or hyphen. If you use the word *from*, you must finish out the range with the word *to*, as shown in this corrected version.

Correct

The meeting will run from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Many people use en dashes all the time when they think they are using em dashes. There are multiple ways to form these two dash types, but methods vary across platforms, so please consult knowledgeable co-workers or the internet for relevant dash-formation expertise. For additional hyphen guidance, see [4.5](#).

Chapter 4

Minding the Details

This chapter covers guidelines on the use of parentheses, square brackets, quotation marks, capital letters, apostrophes, and hyphens.

4.1 Parentheses and Brackets

Parentheses enclose peripheral or nonessential information. If the enclosed words are not a complete sentence, then you can format your sentences as in these examples:

Only three people (the interns in the development office) failed to show up for the meeting.

In college Marla had three majors (astronomy, physics, and chemistry).

If a complete sentence is enclosed in parentheses, it can either appear as part of another sentence or stand apart on its own. The following examples illustrate proper punctuation and capitalization.

I don't have time to talk now (the meeting begins in five minutes) and probably won't be free until late afternoon.

If you would like a copy of the manuscript (my assistant has an extra one), I would be glad to mail it to you.

I ran out of time. (Energy, on the other hand, was never in short supply.)

Often in a report or other document, writers make reference to charts and exhibits. Both of the following approaches are acceptable:

GNP rose dramatically during that period (see Table 2 for details).

GNP rose dramatically during that period. (See Table 2 for details.)

Be careful not to overuse parentheses, as each pair of them causes a significant break in the flow of words.

Overuse of parentheses can cause your writing to become choppy.

In addition, if you have quite a few parentheses in a document, you may be including too much information that is only marginally relevant to the document's purpose. If an idea or detail doesn't really further your goal in writing, consider removing it.

If the material in parentheses is directly relevant, consider removing the parentheses and integrating the material more fully with the rest of your text.

Don't use one set of parentheses inside another set of parentheses. If you must insert parenthetical information within parenthetical information, use square brackets [] inside the first set of parentheses.

4.2 Quotation Marks

This section contains guidelines for different configurations of quotations within your own sentences. See [3.2.8](#) for information on the use of commas before quotations.

4.2.1 Quotation Marks for Emphasis (Don't Do It!)

The written equivalent of air quotes—that is, the drawing of quotation marks in the air while speaking—is the use of quotation marks to emphasize or set off words, as in the following example.

Weak

The doctor was not “people-friendly.”

When writers use quotation marks in this way, it is often a sign that the wording of the sentence is poor and needs to be changed. Instead of using quotation marks, express your ideas so that the words themselves naturally carry the

weight of what you want to say, in an appropriately formal and specific way. For example:

Stronger

The doctor was impatient and curt with his patients.

4.2.2 Quotation Marks with Commas and Periods

Do, however, use quotation marks when you are actually quoting someone or something. The following examples illustrate common quotation formats:

She said, "The trial will begin tomorrow morning."
"The trial will begin tomorrow morning," she said.

In American usage, which differs from British, commas and periods always go inside closing quotation marks, regardless of whether the punctuation is actually part of the quoted material.

American English

The paralegal called the case a "terrifying, interminable debacle."

The paralegal called the case a "terrifying, interminable debacle," but she said she thought we would win.

British English

The paralegal called the case a 'terrifying, interminable debacle'.

The paralegal called the case a 'terrifying, interminable debacle', but she said she thought we would win.

4.2.3 Quotation Marks with Question Marks and Exclamation Points

The placement of question marks and exclamation points around quotation marks is logical. They appear inside the quotation marks only if they are part of the actual quotation.

He asked, "Is the lock broken?"

“Is the lock broken?” he asked.

but

What did she mean when she referred to “the unethical dealings of our local government”?

* * *

He exclaimed, “Don’t be late!”

“Don’t be late!” he exclaimed.

but

How dare you call me a “greedy sycophant”!

4.2.4 Quotation Marks and Semicolons

If a semicolon immediately follows a quotation in a sentence, place the semicolon outside the quotation marks.

The company publicly questioned its rival’s “multiple conflicts of interest”; however, it declined to identify those conflicts in any detail.

4.3 Capitalization

On average, business documents contain more capitalization than is necessary or desirable. Do not capitalize words to emphasize them or make them seem more important; capital letters have prescribed uses that are a matter of editorial convention, not personal preference. Capitalizing words at random makes a piece of writing look messy and unprofessional. (For information on capital letters in bulleted lists, see [5.2](#).)

4.3.1 Capitalization of Proper Nouns

Capitalize names of specific places, buildings, people, organizations, and so on. For example:

Marisa Stuckey
Brooklyn Bridge
Environmental Protection Agency

If you are uncertain about whether to capitalize something, try looking it up in a current dictionary. Dictionaries contain far more information than mere definitions, and you can often find advice on capitalization there.

4.3.2 Capitalization of Titles and Headings

In titles of reports, articles, etc., as well as section headings, use initial capital letters for all major words. Also capitalize the first and last words of both the title and the subtitle, regardless of whether they are major words or not. Do not capitalize the following:

- articles (*a, an, the*)
- coordinating conjunctions such as *and* and *or*
- prepositions four letters or shorter (e.g., *by, with, to, of*)

The following titles illustrate standard capitalization practices:

Software Training for the Technophobic

Interviewing with Confidence: A Manager's Guide to Hiring

Workplace Writing in the Twenty-First Century

Note the capitalization of *First* in the last title. If you have a hyphenated word in a title or heading where both parts could also stand alone as words, capitalize both parts. However, if the first part is just a prefix (such as *pre-*) that can't stand alone as a word, don't capitalize the part after the hyphen.

4.3.3 Overcapitalization

Professional titles are one area where unnecessary capitalization is rampant. *Human resources manager*, *marketing director*, etc., should generally not be capitalized if they appear after a person's name.

Even before someone's name, only very official, formal titles are capitalized—for example, titles of senior politicians, academics, generals, and so on. This category does not usually include business titles.

In the seven sample sentences below, the titles in the very first and very last sentences are the only ones that require an initial capital letter.

I read that **Mayor** Jones would be attending the conference.

I read that Lisa Jones, the mayor of Smalltown, would be attending the conference.

* * *

We received a note from chairman of the board Roberta Weintraub.

We received a note from Roberta Weintraub, the chairman of the board.

* * *

The report discusses research conducted by Thomas Braddeck, professor of sociology.

The report discusses research conducted by sociology professor Thomas Braddeck.

The report discusses research conducted by **Professor** Braddeck.

Now, suppose you were creating a conference brochure in which you listed various speakers. In that case, capitalization of professional titles would be both appropriate and desirable. For example:

Presenters

Lisa Jones
Mayor, Smalltown

Roberta Weintraub
Chairman of the Board
XYZ, Inc.

Dr. Thomas Braddeck
Professor of Sociology
Smalltown University

4.4 Apostrophes

The main uses of apostrophes are in contractions and possessives. Avoid using them to form simple plurals, a common error.

4.4.1 Possessives of Singular Nouns

To form the possessive of a singular common noun, add 's:

a dog's life
a co-worker's laptop
the boss's nephew
the CEO's office

Don't be perturbed by the *s* pileup in *boss's*. It's completely standard. You actually pronounce the extra *s*, so why not write it?

Complications arise when people form the possessive of a proper noun (i.e., a name) that ends in *s*. You will see two formats in practice, and both are acceptable.

Ms. Jones's firm *or* Ms. Jones' firm
Ross's firm *or* Ross' firm

Journalists often leave off the *s* in these cases. If you prefer to follow that fairly common journalistic style, you will have plenty of company, but many experts—as well as leading periodicals such as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*—prefer *Ms. Jones's firm* to *Ms. Jones' firm*.

If your company or department has preferences for possessive formation, you should probably follow those practices. This is no hill to die on!

4.4.2 Possessives of Plural Nouns

To form the possessive of a plural noun, generally add an apostrophe to the end of the word, as in:

the executives' analysis

- This means *analysis conducted by multiple executives*.

the professors' books

- This means *books written by multiple professors*.

Use the same approach for possessives of both common and proper nouns. The method is exactly the same for names as it is for common nouns:

the Smiths' house

- This refers to the house that multiple Smith family members live in.

the Joneses' car

- This means the car that multiple Jones family members ride around town in.

Now you are ready to write your holiday cards!

Some plural nouns, however, do not end in *s*. For these irregular plurals, form the possessive by adding an *'s* to the end of the word, as in:

the women's room
the children's school
the men's sauna

The following forms are always mistakes:

Incorrect

mens'
womens'
childrens'

4.4.3 Joint Ownership

Sometimes a possessive involves two or more nouns. Compare these two examples:

Jill and Jack's company
Jill's and Jack's desks

In the first example, there is joint ownership: Jill and Jack share ownership of a company. In such cases, only the second noun—here, *Jack's*—shows the possessive form.

In the second example, Jill and Jack each have a desk. In this scenario, where ownership is not shared, both of the nouns have possessive endings—hence, *Jill's and Jack's*. If they shared a single gigantic desk, however, the phrase would be *Jill and Jack's desk*.

4.4.4 No Apostrophes in Possessive Pronouns

People often mistakenly add apostrophes to possessive pronouns such as the following:

ours
its
theirs
yours
hers
whose

None of the possessives above should ever appear with an apostrophe.

It's is a word, but it is not a possessive pronoun; rather, it is a contraction for *it is* or *it has*. Below are three examples of proper usage.

It's been a long time. (*it has*)
It's raining cats and dogs. (*it is*)

Its tail was wagging. (possessive)

If you are unsure whether to use *its* or *it's* in a particular context, try substituting the words *it is* or *it has*. If the substitution doesn't make sense, use the (apostrophe-free) possessive *its*.

The same goes for the possessive *whose*. *Who's* is a contraction meaning *who is* or *who has*; never use it as a possessive. The following three sentences show correct usage.

I know whose wallet this is. (possessive)
I know who's going to the event. (*who is*)
Who's been knocking at my door? (*who has*)

4.4.5 Some Other Places Not to Use Apostrophes

Do not use an apostrophe in references to decades.

Lloyd began his career in the 1990s.
I was born in the 1970s.

In addition, do not use apostrophes to make abbreviations plural. Here are four typical examples:

NDA	non-disclosure agreement
ATM	automated teller machine
ABS	asset-backed security
CEO	chief executive officer

To make these plural, simply add *s*.

NDA
ATMs
ABSs
CEOs

A note on terminology: abbreviations like these are often mistakenly referred to as *acronyms*. They are in fact

initialisms. Both acronyms and initialisms are formed by combining the first letters of the words in a term or name, but acronyms are also then pronounced as words themselves (*radar*, *AWOL*, etc.), while initialisms aren't. However, expect to hear *acronym* broadly as an umbrella term for all such abbreviations.

Lastly, do not use apostrophes to make surnames plural. Here are two examples of correct plural formation:

We visited the Smiths.

The Robertsons toured the plant today.

4.5 Hyphens

Many business documents suffer from either overhyphenation or underhyphenation. Hyphens are a tricky business; good dictionaries, books, and magazines vary in their treatment of individual cases. Often hyphens involve stylistic preferences rather than strict right-versus-wrong decisions. Simply knowing that may reduce hyphenation stress.

One thing many people don't realize is how much excellent hyphenation guidance is readily available in dictionaries. If you are unsure whether to hyphenate a commonly used phrase, try looking it up in a good current dictionary first. Merriam-Webster and American Heritage both make their current content available online for free. What you are looking for will not always be there, but you may get lucky!

For example, multiple dictionaries list *full-time* with a hyphen for both the adverb and adjective forms. You would therefore write:

Adverb

He works full-time.

Adjective

He has a full-time job.

Real estate, by contrast, appears in the fifth edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* in two forms. As a noun it is unhyphenated: *real estate*. As an adjective it is shown as hyphenated: *real-estate*. The difference is reflected in these two examples:

Noun

The fund manager invested in real estate.

but

Adjective

The fund manager invested in real-estate stocks.

Hyphenating makes it crystal clear that the adjective *real* belongs with the word *estate* rather than the word *stocks*. Not all good published writing hyphenates *real-estate* as an adjective, so you will not see uniformity in the real world, but the practice described here is widespread.

The hyphenated examples with *full-time* and *real-estate* are easy ones, because they are so common that they have become fixtures in reference books and can easily be looked up. What about this example, though?

Joan's shirt was stained with chemicals. She took her chemical-stained shirt to the cleaners.

You will not find *chemical-stained* in your dictionary, because it isn't a common word combination. Thus, it is up to you to determine whether a hyphen is necessary. In this case, a hyphen is useful, as it shows that *chemical* describes *stained*, and that they are working together as a single adjective modifying *shirt*. Although the average reader is unlikely to be confused about the writer's intended meaning

even without the hyphen here, one goal of hyphenation is to make word relationships such as these instantly clear to the reader.

In addition, omitting standard hyphens can look unprofessional and can also, in some cases, actually create confusion as the reader struggles to figure out which words go together and which don't. Consider the following example.

I encountered a fast talking man.

Is the man moving fast and talking at the same time, or is he a fast talker? The likelier interpretation is the second, but the ambiguity lies in the fact that *fast* can technically be an adjective modifying *man*. To make it easier for the reader to read the sentence correctly, a hyphen is preferable in this case.

I encountered a fast-talking man.

Now it is clear that *fast* modifies *talking*.

While neglecting necessary hyphens can add to a reader's labor, it is probably worse for the reader if you hyphenate unnecessarily. Avoiding this common problem will help your writing appear more polished. Don't put hyphens in words where they aren't needed.

Incorrect

Ken attended the semi-annual human resources conference.

Correct

Ken attended the semiannual human resources conference.

* * *

Incorrect

She needs to reset the machine.

Correct

She needs to reset the machine.

In these cases, the writer could have simply looked up the well-established words *semiannual* and *reset* in any number of dictionaries and found them there, hyphen-free.

In addition, the prefix *re-* does not typically need a hyphen between it and the word it is attached to.

One of the most common types of hyphenation errors occurs when people hyphenate verb forms the same way they hyphenate corresponding noun forms. The following two sentences illustrate correct and incorrect verb formats.

Incorrect

The staff set-up the chairs.

Correct

The staff set up the chairs.

For the noun version, the form is different:

Correct

Has the staff completed the set-up?

or

Has the staff completed the setup?

Both hyphenated and unhyphenated forms are acceptable for the noun: *set-up* and *setup*.

A comparable example involves *follow-up*, which is a noun, and *follow up*, for the verb form.

Noun

Lisa's follow-up was inadequate.

Followup is also in use, but less broadly accepted than *setup*, for this not terribly scientific reason: it looks weird.

Verb

Lisa will follow up with the marketing director.

A final common example of overhyphenation appears after adverbs ending in */y*, as in the following examples:

Incorrect

She bought a fully-refundable airline ticket.

Correct

She bought a fully refundable airline ticket.

The hyphen is unnecessary because *fully* is an obvious adverb. As discussed in [1.5](#), adverbs can modify only verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. In this sentence, the only nearby word that *fully* could modify is the adjective *refundable*. It is not grammatically possible for *fully* to modify *ticket*, so reader confusion is not a concern.

Chapter 5

Special Topics in Formatting

This chapter covers various topics in formatting: of numbers, bulleted information, and punctuation.

5.1 Number Format

There is no absolute rule for number format; conventions vary. A standard that is practical for most business applications is to write the numbers one through nine as words, then switch to number format after that.

one
two
three
four
five
six
seven
eight
nine
10
14
108
etc.

Here are some common exceptions to this general guideline:

- when you are talking about measurements, dollar amounts, percentages, and so on

Our sales have increased 5% this year.
You owe me \$5.

- in spreadsheet cells when you are doing some kind of quantitative analysis or presentation of data (obviously!)
- when you are comparing numbers under 10 with numbers 10 or higher in the same sentence

Sara ordered 17 books, Jim ordered 2, and Raj ordered 132.

This example could also be written as follows, because, once again, there is no global number law.

Sara ordered 17 books, Jim ordered two, and Raj ordered 132.

Use logic to guide you in your choices. If you feel your text looks better with *12* written as *twelve*, then do it!

Lastly, if you write fractions as words rather than numbers, these two sentences illustrate the convention:

One-fourth of the estate will go to their grandson Nick.

We took a poll, and two-thirds of our employees would like an employee gym.

5.2 Bullet Format

Bullets in most business documents are designed to make content more readable. Bulleted items tend to be heavily punctuated in legal documents, but you don't need to emulate that for business documents. The point of bullets in business is usually to make things easier to read. Unnecessary punctuation doesn't help achieve that goal.

As with number format, there aren't absolute laws about bullet format, but below you will find some suggestions.

5.2.1 Bulleted Lists of Simple Phrases

In simple lists of noun phrases, verbs, etc., you don't have to capitalize the first word of each bulleted item. You may do so if you feel it looks better, but it can sometimes seem excessive.

Below are two examples of basic bulleted lists without capitalization of the individual bulleted items.

For his talk, Nikhil has requested the following:

- a white board

- a projector
- two black markers
- two red markers
- classroom seating

As part of our new employee fitness program, we will be scheduling:

- group walks at lunch
- onsite yoga classes
- nutrition lectures on the first Monday of every month

If you prefer initial capital letters for bulleted phrases, that is a reasonable choice. Especially when one of the items is a proper noun, some people prefer to use initial caps with all items.

As part of our new employee fitness program, we will be scheduling:

- XYZ Inc.–sponsored group walks at lunch
- Onsite yoga classes
- Nutrition lectures on the first Monday of every month

There is no need to use commas, semicolons, or periods at the end of each bulleted phrase. Doing so will cause the list to look more cluttered and make it harder to read.

5.2.2 Bulleted Lists and Parallelism

Make a valiant effort to keep your individual items grammatically parallel. In other words, stick to lists of all noun phrases, all predicates, all sentences, and so on. (See 8.3 for more on parallelism.) Don't mix and match grammatical structures, as in this list:

Avoid

As part of our new employee fitness program, we will be scheduling:

- XYZ Inc.–sponsored group walks at lunch.
- Onsite yoga classes.
- On the first Monday of every month, we will host nutrition lectures.

In this list, there are two noun phrases followed by a full sentence as the last item. That's inconsistent. All bulleted items here are shown with a concluding period, which is a common but usually undesirable choice when not all the items are sentences. In such cases, the problem is less about punctuation, though, than it is about a lack of parallel grammatical structures.

In this case, the third item does not fit with the others and does not read correctly with the opening sentence. You cannot say, “As part of our new employee fitness program, we will be scheduling . . . on the first Monday of every month, we will host nutrition lectures.” The first bullet works, the second bullet works, but the third one doesn't. The next section offers solutions.

5.2.3 Bulleted Lists of Sentences

When you have full sentences in a bulleted list, put a period at the end of each item unless, perhaps, you are going for high design on very short clauses under the guidance of a skilled professional.

If you want to have sentences instead of phrases, go all the way and be consistent.

As part of our new employee fitness program, we have several new initiatives:

- XYZ Inc. will sponsor group walks at lunch.
- Onsite yoga classes will be held daily in the employee lounge.

- On the first Monday of every month, we will host nutrition lectures.

A period would be acceptable in place of the colon after the words *several new initiatives*.

It is common and appropriate to use numbers rather than bullets in certain lists—for example, lists of steps someone needs to take. You still have the same obligation to be grammatically consistent. Here is an example with numbers.

Mark,

I am running late for the meeting this morning. Could you please take care of the following for me?

1. Let Jim know I will be 20 minutes late.
2. Distribute the printed materials in the conference room.
3. Make sure the slides are ready to go on the conference room laptop.

Thank you very much, and I'll see you soon!

Elaine

5.2.4 Punctuation Before Bulleted Lists

Right before a bulleted list begins, you have two main choices of punctuation: a colon (the most common choice) and a period. Below are several examples with commentary.

Option 1

The company introduced several new products:

- lightweight lawn chairs
- oversized beach blankets
- green volleyballs

You cannot use a period after *products* in [Option 1](#), because the idea is not complete without the bulleted items.

In addition, you must use a colon, because the grammar of the sentence requires it. If the sentence were written without bulleting, it would still require a colon, as shown here:

The company introduced several new products: lightweight lawn chairs, oversized beach blankets, and green volleyballs.

The second option, below, contains a new word: *including*.

Option 2

The company introduced several new products, including:

- lightweight lawn chairs
- oversized beach blankets
- green volleyballs

In [Option 2](#), you once again can't use a period, for the same reason as in [Option 1](#): the sentence is not grammatically complete without the content in the bulleted items.

You can still use a colon in the bulleted version, however, simply because it is a widespread convention to place a colon before a bulleted list, regardless of the grammar of the sentence. Note that unlike [Option 1](#), the content in [Option 2](#) would not include a colon if it were written without bullets:

The company introduced several new products, including lightweight lawn chairs, oversized beach blankets, and green volleyballs.

You may also omit the colon after *including* if you prefer.

Option 3

The company introduced several new products, including

- lightweight lawn chairs

- oversized beach blankets
- green volleyballs

Leaving the colon out, as in [Option 3](#), is less popular than [Option 2](#), but there is room for thoughtful variety in the world.

The fourth and fifth options below illustrate two punctuation approaches to a set of instructions. In both cases, an opening sentence introduces a bulleted list of other sentences.

Option 4

To use this device, complete the steps below:

1. Fill it with water and place it on the stove.
2. Turn on the burner.
3. Wait for the water to boil.
4. Turn off the burner.

Option 5

To use this device, complete the steps below.

1. Fill it with water and place it on the stove.
2. Turn on the burner.
3. Wait for the water to boil.
4. Turn off the burner.

Either a colon ([Option 4](#)) or a period ([Option 5](#)) will do.

5.3 Spaces After Periods and Other End Punctuation

End punctuation refers to punctuation at the end of a sentence: periods, exclamation points, and question marks.

Long, long ago in the typewriter era, people were regularly taught to put two spaces after not only end punctuation but also colons. There is a reason for this. Typewriters allocated the same amount of horizontal space

to every letter, which meant that the letter *l*, which is very skinny, and the letter *m*, which is not at all skinny, were allocated the same real estate on the typewritten page. Thus, spacing even within words was erratic in a way it is not today, now that words are automatically smushed and stretched by software for maximum aesthetic enjoyment.

A convention arose at some point that two spaces would be placed after end punctuation in order to make it easier, amid the uneven spacing of your average typed document, to find the ends of sentences. Manuscripts had two spaces after periods. Letters had two spaces after periods. Proposals had two spaces after periods. Resumes had two spaces after periods.

However, magazine articles, books, news stories, etc., have had a single space after end punctuation for as long as most of us have been alive. Publications have long had trained experts and advanced tools to move around the letters and make everything look its absolute best on the page. On our home and office typewriters, we didn't have that capability.

Today, computers enable us all to be fancy, like the specialists of the past. They take care of spacing everything nicely for us, making the two spaces of the typewriter era unnecessary.

You may do as you like, but the more modern approach is a single space after all marks that used to get two: periods, exclamation points, question marks, and colons. Whatever you choose for yourself, think carefully before insisting that young people who have been raised as one-spacers type two spaces. The cost in morale, time, and errors (because it is hard to amend this habit) to preserve a dying practice is not worth it.

And besides, people who are searching for new jobs are regularly advised to remove the second space from their resumes or risk dating themselves. An important responsibility of a manager is to prepare employees

professionally for the world they are in today, not the world yesterday. You may have an unusual context that requires two spaces; most people don't.

Now, to all the one-spacers: avoid "fixing" your manager's spacing unasked. Two-spacers still exist, and we can and must all get along.

Whatever you do personally, make sure you are in agreement with others when you co-edit documents. Otherwise, spacing chaos will ensue.

5.4 Citing Books and Other Works in Your Writing

Italicize titles of books, movies, magazines, albums, and plays when you mention them in your writing.

My co-workers and I are reading *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison for our next lunchtime reading group.

We will be showing the documentary *Man on Wire* at our corporate retreat.

If you mention titles of articles, poems, songs, or chapters of books, put quotation marks around the titles.

In "The End of Punctuation Punctiliousness," the writer bemoans the decline of the comma.

When you cite periodicals whose names begin with the word *The*—*The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, etc.—you don't need to capitalize and italicize the word *The*. Some people prefer to, but it's a matter of personal (and possibly employer) preference.

Our subscription to the *New York Times* just increased in price.

Our subscription to *The New York Times* just increased in price.

Chapter 6

Common Verb Errors and Problems

Verbs are a frequent focus of grammatical arguments. They therefore deserve their own chapter! For a handy summary of verb tenses/forms and what to call them, see [10.7](#).

6.1 Subject-Verb Agreement

This first section addresses subject-verb agreement errors. If the subject of a clause is singular, the corresponding verb must be singular; in other words, it must agree with the subject. If the subject is plural, the verb should be plural.

Keep in mind that although plural nouns usually end in *s*, verbs operate differently. An *s* ending on a verb signals a singular form—the opposite of what it signals on a noun.

Singular

The student **arrives**.

Plural

The **students** arrive.

6.1.1 Subjects That Appear to Be Plural But Aren't

Sometimes a subject appears to be plural when it is actually singular. In the following example, both the subject and the verb are plural.

Compound Subject • Verb

Kale and **cantaloupe** *are* not my favorite foods.

The next example appears similar, but the subject is the name of a single dish and is therefore singular.

Singular Subject • Verb

Spaghetti and meatballs *is* my favorite food.

Because the subject is singular, the verb is singular, too.

Another type of singular subject that can misleadingly appear to be plural involves phrases such as *along with* or *as well as*. Compare these two examples:

Jill and **Jack** *like* reading the sports section.

Jill as well as Jack *likes* reading the sports section.

The sentences have very similar meanings, but the grammatical structures differ. In the first case, the subject—*Jill and Jack*—is plural, and so is the verb. In the second example, the grammatical subject is *Jill* alone; *as well as Jack* is not considered to be part of it. Therefore, the subject takes the singular verb *likes* rather than the plural *like*.

The phrase *along with* works the same way. Thus, in the following sentence, both the subject and verb are singular:

An ineffective **boss**, along with dull work and long hours, *is* leading Peter to consider quitting.

Peter may be affected by the dull work and long hours, but the verb isn't.

Commas around phrases beginning with *as well as* or *along with* can be useful, but whether to include them is often fairly subjective. If you do put a comma before *as well as* or *along with*, remember to put a second comma at the end of the phrase, as in the example with Peter's ineffective boss.

6.1.2 Subjects and Prepositional Phrases

The subject of a simple sentence cannot be part of a prepositional phrase. Consider the following example:

The quality of their products has/have been deteriorating.

Has is a singular verb; *have* is plural. Which is the correct form in this sentence?

To answer that question, first identify the subject. The subject is not *products*, because *products* is the object in the prepositional phrase *of their products* and therefore cannot be the subject of this independent clause. Instead, the subject is *quality*, so the verb is singular: *has*.

Here is another example:

Every one of you has/have something to contribute.

What is the subject of the sentence? The subject cannot be *you*, because *you* is part of the prepositional phrase *of you*. Instead, the subject is the pronoun *one*, so the correct verb form is again *has*.

6.1.3 Agreement with the Word Number

Depending on the context, the word *number* can be singular or plural.

If it is used in combination with the indefinite article *a*, it should generally appear with a plural verb, as in:

A number of schools *are* closed today.

When used with the definite article *the*, however, *number* usually requires a singular verb, as in:

The number of schools *is* increasing.

6.1.4 Agreement with Each, Neither, and Either

When appearing before the word *of*, the words *each*, *neither*, and *either* are all singular pronouns and therefore require singular verbs. These pronouns are often used with plural verbs in speech, but in carefully edited workplace writing, the convention is to use a singular verb.

Subject • Verb

Each of the volumes *is* fascinating.

Neither of you *understands* me.

The verb is matched up with *each* in the first sentence, and *neither* in the second. Don't get distracted by *volumes* or *you*.

6.1.5 Agreement with Either/or and Neither/Nor

The correlative conjunction pairs *either/or* and *neither/nor* can create subject-verb agreement challenges. Compare these two sentences:

Neither Horton nor the Babbits have arrived.

Neither the Babbits nor Horton has arrived.

This is an odd grammatical case where geography matters: the element of the subject closest to the verb gets to determine its form. In the first example above, *Babbits* immediately precedes the verb, so the verb is plural: *have*. In the second sentence, *Horton* appears next to the verb, so the verb is singular: *has*.

6.1.6 Plural Units, Singular Concepts

Units of time, distance, money, and weight may appear plural, but are in fact often treated as singular amounts. For instance:

Five minutes **is** not going to be enough time to finish this pie chart.

Six miles **is** too far.

Seven hundred dollars **is** a lot of money to lose gambling.

Twenty pounds **is** a lot to lose in two months. Congratulations!

6.1.7 Verb Forms After Who

Relative clauses (see [3.2.6](#)) are often culprits in agreement errors. In the following example, which contains no relative

clause, *one* is the subject, and the verb is therefore singular: *has*.

One of the employees has been reprimanded.

Now consider this sentence:

Carol is one of the employees who has/have been reprimanded.

Should the verb be *has* or *have*? To answer that question, first determine the antecedent for the pronoun *who*. Has only one employee been reprimanded, or have multiple employees been reprimanded?

The answer is multiple; Carol is merely one of them. The antecedent for *who* is *employees*, a plural noun, and thus the corresponding verb must also be plural. Use *have* in this example.

6.1.8 Agreement with Collective Nouns

In American English, collective nouns (see [1.1](#)) are generally treated as singular, unless the members of the group are being considered individually. Compare these two sentences:

The couple is getting married next Sunday.

The couple are arguing with each other.

In the first sentence, the couple is acting in concert, so the subject and verb are both singular. In the second, they are acting as individuals, so the subject and verb are plural. However, this is just an example of what you *might* see. Real-life practices vary widely.

In contrast with American English, British English is more likely to treat collective nouns, including names of teams and companies, as plurals. For example, this is a natural sentence in British English.

United are playing tonight.

United refers to Manchester United Football Club. It would be extremely unusual to see this sentence in American English, which favors *is* in such cases.

Nonetheless, you will still see variety even within the US. Expect some fights over this one, and remember that there is often more than one possible answer. This is one of the grayer of grammatical gray areas.

6.1.9 Agreement with None

Which would you pick?

None of my co-workers **speak** Indonesian.

None of my co-workers **speaks** Indonesian.

The good news is that both are right, so you can't go wrong. *None* can mean *not one* or *not any*, and *any* can have a singular or a plural meaning. *None* has often been mistaught in classrooms as a strict singular, the equivalent of *not one*, but that is too restrictive a view in light of both dictionary definitions and actual usage.

Let's say that you are doing business in Indonesia, so you really need an Indonesian speaker to help you. If you wish to emphasize that *not a single one* of the employees speaks the language, then you might default to the singular verb: *speaks*. The plural choice, *speak*, focuses less on the idea of *not a single one* and is more akin to saying, "I don't have any co-workers who speak Indonesian."

In free-flowing speech, unhampered by fifth-grade grammar edicts, people tend to default to plural verbs after *none*. Below is another example. Which verb would you pick?

None of our employees **have** arrived.

None of our employees **has** arrived.

In this case, more people would probably pick the sentence with the plural verb: *have*. That may be because the emphasis is not so much on the idea that not a single employee has shown up, but rather, that there aren't any employees here yet.

6.1.10 Agreement with Percentages

For verbs after percentages, first consider whether the thing you are taking a percentage of is countable or uncountable.

Uncountable nouns cannot be counted. Examples include *cement*, *salt*, and *air*.

Countable nouns, unsurprisingly, *can* be counted. *Staplers*, *cats*, *offices*, and *directors* are all countable nouns.

These two examples begin the same way but have different verb outcomes:

One percent of our employees **use** standing desks.

One percent of the steel **needs** to be discarded.

In the first case, *employees* is a countable noun. Use a plural verb, e.g., *use*, there. In the second case, *steel* is not countable, so you need a singular verb: *needs*.

6.2 Passive Voice

The relationship between public conceptions of passive voice and the reality of passive voice is very poor. Passive voice is not an error, despite its terrible reputation. It can be awkward, especially when used to excess, but it is not wrong, and in the right hands, it can sometimes even be a useful and witty tool.

A passive-voice construction contains (1) a form of the verb *to be* and (2) a **past participle**, which is the form of a verb that could fit in the following blank:

I have _____.

Feel free to try this with a subject other than *I* if you prefer.

Below are examples of past participles; all could fit in that blank.

eaten

predicted

phoned

tried

written

The following sentence is written in passive voice:

A slow recovery was predicted by some economists.

In this example, *was*, a form of *to be*, is followed by the past participle *predicted*. As is the case with passive voice, the recipient of the action—here, the *recovery*—is the grammatical subject of the sentence. The agent of action—in this example, *some economists*—follows the verb and appears as part of a prepositional phrase beginning with *by*.

You can eliminate many instances of passive voice by converting sentences to **active voice**. In an active-voice construction, the agent of action is also the grammatical subject. The active-voice version of the sentence above is:

Some economists predicted a slow recovery.

Active voice is generally preferable to passive voice because it is more direct and usually uses fewer words. That *still* doesn't make passive voice an error.

More problematic perhaps than misconceptions about its status as a grammatical issue is the habit many working professionals have of “fixing” passive voice that is not actually passive voice.

How many of these sentences contain passive voice?

My boss was running down the hallway.

Mabel was inconsolable.

He was tired.

They have decided to resign.

The answer is none. Don't try to fix passive voice that isn't passive voice to begin with. (For the curious, sentence 1 contains what is known as *past continuous* or *past progressive*, sentences 2 and 3 simply contain the singular past-tense form of *to be*, and sentence 4 contains what is called *present perfect*. No passive voice in sight.)

6.3 Common Errors in Verb Form

Regular verbs in English are pretty reliable and easy. It is the irregular verbs that cause most of the trouble, so those will be the focus of this section.

6.3.1 Prickly Past Tenses and Past Participles

For regular verbs, the past tense and the past participle (see [6.2](#)) are the same. For example:

I **lived**.

I have **lived**.

Wilhelm **walked**

Wilhelm has **walked**.

When verbs are irregular, the past tense often differs from the past participle. Many past-participle mistakes involve the use of the past tense where the past participle is called for. Common examples appear in the table below.

Verb	Past	Past Participle
to run	He <u>ran</u> .	He has <u>run</u> . (Not <i>He has ran</i> .)
to	She	She should have <u>eaten</u> . (Not <i>She should</i>

eat	<u>ate</u> .	<i>have <u>ate</u>.</i>)
to drink	They <u>drank</u> .	They shouldn't have <u>drunk</u> . (Not <i>They shouldn't have <u>drank</u>.</i>)
to go	He <u>went</u> .	He would have <u>gone</u> . (Not <i>He would have <u>went</u>.</i>)

6.3.2 Multiple Coexisting Verb Forms

When people disagree about correct past-tense or past-participle forms, it is often because there are multiple forms in use. One form may be preferred over the other in formal writing, one may be more common in British English than in American English, or both may be equally active and accepted. Here are two examples:

American English

He spelled the word incorrectly.

British English

He spelt the word incorrectly.

American English

She traveled to Zimbabwe.

British English

She travelled to Zimbabwe.

That doesn't mean there aren't Americans who write *travelled* rather than *traveled*; there are. However, it is very rare to see *spelt* in the US unless the person is writing about an ancient grain. It is a good idea to use the forms dominant in your region. Remembering that English is heterogeneous in the modern world is helpful in navigating past-participle variety.

6.3.3 Forms of To Lie and To Lay

The verbs *to lie* and *to lay* cause a great deal of confusion. (This discussion focuses on *to lie* in the sense of “to lie down,” not in the sense of deceiving others.) Although *to lie* and *to lay* have related meanings, they are in fact two different verbs with different forms.

To lie is an intransitive verb, meaning it cannot take a direct object. *To lay* is transitive, meaning it *must* have a direct object.

Here are the standard forms for each of the verbs:

Verb Tense	To Lie	To Lay
PRESENT	He <i>lies</i> down.	He <i>lays</i> the book on the table.
PAST	He <i>lay</i> down.	He <i>laid</i> the book on the table.
PRESENT PERFECT	He <i>has lain</i> down.	He <i>has laid</i> the book on the table.

As you can see in the table above, the past tense of *to lie* looks like the present tense of *to lay*. That similarity is a source of many *lie-lay* mix-ups.

Therefore, it should be *I lay down on the bed*, not *I laid down on the bed*; the correct past-tense form in this case is *lay*. The good news is, in speech people can't hear the difference between those two sentences.

6.3.4 Of as a Verb Substitute

People often write the way they speak. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does sometimes lead to spelling errors such as:

I could of won.

This mistake occurs because people are accustomed to hearing and saying, *I could've won, I could've helped you, or I should've been there.* The *ve* in the contraction is mistakenly transcribed as *of*.

The correct version is:

I could have won.

Chapter 7

Common Pronoun Errors and Problems

Pronoun-related grammatical challenges abound in both writing and speech. They often involve choices between words such as *I* and *me*, *who* and *whom*, and *which* and *that*. Another writing challenge is the dearth, in English, of singular gender-neutral pronouns. This chapter offers numerous pronoun tips and strategies.

7.1 Personal Pronouns

Personal pronouns include the following:

I
you
he
she
it
we
they

The forms of these words mutate based on how they are used in a sentence. Below are the correct forms for pronouns when they appear in the following contexts: (1) as the subject of a sentence, (2) as an object (e.g., a direct object or object of a preposition), and (3) as what are known as **reflexives**.

1 Subject Form	2 Object Form	3 Reflexive
I	me	myself
you (<i>singular and plural</i>)	you (<i>singular and plural</i>)	yourself (<i>singular</i>) yourselves (<i>plural</i>)
he	him	himself
she	her	herself
it	it	itself
we	us	ourselves

they	them	themselves
------	------	------------

Use the reflexive form when the subject and object are the same entity or entities. For instance:

He berated himself.
They laughed at themselves.

The table below identifies some common errors in the use of personal pronouns and in each case explains how to determine the correct version.

Incorrect	Correct	Explanation
This is her.	This is she.	When a pronoun follows a form of the verb <i>to be</i> , use the subject form.
Between you and I, she is wrong.	Between you and me, she is wrong.	The phrase is never <i>between you and I</i> ; it should always be <i>between you and me</i> . <i>Between</i> is a preposition, so the object form of the pronoun— <i>me</i> —is required.
He spoke to John and myself.	He spoke to John and me.	Take out the words <i>John and</i> for a moment. You would not write <i>He spoke to myself</i> . Adding John to the sentence does not affect pronoun form.
She called John and I.	She called John and me.	Again, take out the words <i>John and</i> . You would not write <i>She called I</i> . The pronoun should be <i>me</i> —the object form.

7.2 Who vs. Whom

Use *who* if you need the subject form and *whom* if you need the object form.

Oh, if only it were that easy! Most native English speakers are not accustomed to thinking about subject and object

forms at the speed of speech.

Determining with consistent accuracy which form you need requires a good understanding of grammar in general, and of sentence structure in particular.

Even if you feel shaky on those things, however, you can still do pretty well using a simple substitution test that works in many contexts. The following three examples, all of which require a *who-whom* decision, illustrate how the substitution test works.

EXAMPLE A

Who/whom did you call?

In this case, the correct form is *whom*. The grammatical explanation is that the pronoun is the direct object in this clause, so the object form is required. If you can't immediately tell that by looking at the sentence, though, you have an alternative. Try the following instead:

1. Reorder the words. Example A is a question, so the word order is inverted. Try rearranging the words so that the subject (the doer of the deed) comes first. Then proceed to the verb(s), and so on. You should end up with the following:

You did call [who/whom].

2. Now, instead of choosing between *who* and *whom*, try choosing between the personal pronouns *he* and *him*. (*She* versus *her*, or *they* versus *them*, would work fine as well.)

You did call [he/him].

The reason for this substitution is that most people's ears are much more sensitive to the differences between the

entirely familiar *he* and *him* than they are to *who* and the much less familiar *whom*.

3. Once you have chosen the correct personal pronoun—*him* in this case—you determine which form that is: subject or object. *Him* is the object form. Therefore, you need the object form in the original question: *whom*.

Whom did you call?

Some people are not comfortable using *whom* when they speak. If you have a hard time imagining yourself actually asking this question of a co-worker, that's fine; you are in a majority. Most people would say, "Who did you call?" It would probably sound something like this: "Hoojookall?" There will be no dire consequences for that. There won't even be any non-dire consequences.

Nonetheless, *whom* has not been eliminated from the English language, and in careful writing, it is still a good idea to preserve the *who-whom* distinction.

EXAMPLE B

Andrew, who/whom I admire, is an excellent actor.

Example B contains two clauses. Besides the main clause, *Andrew is an excellent actor*, there is an embedded relative clause, *who/whom I admire*.

In this case, the clause *who/whom I admire* is conveniently set off with commas. Take advantage of those commas! Mentally (or literally) cross out everything except the words between the commas, because the internal grammar of that clause is the only thing affecting the pronoun form.

1. Reorder the words so that the subject appears first.

I admire [who/whom].

2. Replace the *who/whom* above with *he/him*.

I admire [he/him].

3. Choose the correct form: *he* or *him*. Presumably you will choose *him*. That tells you that *whom*, which is also the object form, is the correct choice in the original sentence:

Andrew, whom I admire, is an excellent actor.

EXAMPLE C

Andrew, who/whom I believe is an excellent actor, is currently working part-time as a paralegal.

Once again, cross out everything except the words between the commas. Then:

1. Reorder the words so that the subject appears first.

I believe [who/whom] is an excellent actor.

2. Replace the *who/whom* with *he/him*.

I believe [he/him] is an excellent actor.

3. Determine the correct choice between *he* and *him*, which is the subject form *he*. That tells you that the subject form *who* is the correct form in the original sentence:

Andrew, who I believe is an excellent actor, is currently working part-time as a paralegal.

7.3 Singular Gender-Neutral Pronouns

Historically, one of the more difficult grammatical challenges in English has been figuring out how to avoid repeating awkward phrases such as *he or she*, *him or her*, and *his or her*. Let's consider various options starting with this one:

Option 1

Each employee should bring his or her laptop.

Option 1 obeys a grammatical principle learned and used by many people in the workforce today: a pronoun and its antecedent must both be singular or both be plural. The word *employee* is singular, so it is common for writers to use *his or her*, which is also singular, in cases like this. Unfortunately, *his or her* is clunky. Another objection is that it fails to accommodate people who do not identify as male or female. Audience awareness is critical in all workplace writing: know your audience.

Option 2

Each employee should bring his laptop.
Each employee should bring her laptop.

Option 2 is too limited for most. The first sentence of this pair is typical of what one used to see a lot, but in the modern age, it's out of date. And using *her* instead of *him* does not solve the problem of being too limited.

Option 3

Each employee should bring their laptop.

In this third option, the idea is that *their* (as well as its companion pronouns *they* and *them*) can act as a singular gender-neutral pronoun. This already happens daily and naturally in speech all over the US. In fact, it is a habit that has been around in English for many generations. In Spanish, *su* or *sus* can mean *his*, *her*, *its*, or *their* based on context. The logic behind the singular gender-neutral *their* is that it could work in the same kind of all-purpose way afforded in other languages. It links writing habits with actual speech habits and also automatically includes everyone.

That's why the *Washington Post* now allows *they* to be used in this way, a practice that is slowly gaining acceptance in multiple contexts. Still, it is not universally accepted in business. Many people in the workforce today object to the use of *their* (as well as *they* and *them*) as singular gender-neutral pronouns. They view *their* in the sentence *Each employee should bring their laptop* as a grammatical error and make judgments accordingly.

For now, consider using your grammar and editing skills to write around this writing challenge where possible. You can do things like avoid possessives, make subjects plural, or switch to second person (*you*) if it makes sense.

Don't *force* these options, but you may certainly use them if they work in a given situation. Options in this case include:

Additional Options

Each employee should bring a laptop.

All employees should bring their laptops.

Please bring a laptop.

The same *his-her* problem arises frequently when the subject of the sentence is *everyone*, as in:

Everyone should bring his or her warmest clothing.

The sentence is correct, but awkward. Unfortunately, because *everyone* is singular, more than a few readers will be unhappy with *their* as a replacement for *his or her*. You can certainly choose it, but go into the choice fully informed.

Depending on the content and style of a document, there are ways to rewrite this sentence, too, without raising any grammarian or managerial eyebrows.

Attendees should bring their warmest clothing.

Bring your warmest clothing.

There's creativity involved in this stuff!

7.4 Is That *That* Removable?

In English, unlike some other languages, you are allowed to remove a *that* used as a relative pronoun.

Our CEO believes that the contractors are telling the truth.

Our CEO believes the contractors are telling the truth.

Both of the sentences above are fine and completely clear.

However, if removing a *that* would create confusion, consider keeping it. Here's a more ambiguous sentence.

Our CEO believes Jeff Samuels, the vice president of marketing, and Mary Roberts, the senior vice president of sales, are liars.

There is no error here, but until you get to the last word, you might think the sentence is saying that the CEO believes Jeff Samuels and Mary Roberts, when in fact the sentence is saying the opposite. Adding a *that* eliminates the temporary ambiguity.

Our CEO believes **that** Jeff Samuels, the vice president of marketing, and Mary Roberts, the senior vice president of sales, are liars.

Most people will at some point find themselves gazing at a sentence with multiple instances of *that*. When that happens, it is often a simple matter to cut at least one *that*.

It is not a word crime to have two consecutive instances of *that*, as in the following sentence.

I know that that car is on sale.

However, it bothers some people, and you have options!

For example, you can eliminate the first *that*, as long as the sentence remains clear and sounds fine, as this one does:

I know that car is on sale.

Alternatively, you can eliminate the second *that* by replacing it with other words appropriate to the situation.

I know that the yellow car is on sale.
I know that Celia's car is on sale.

7.5 *Whose* Used with Things

Contrary to rumors, you can use *whose* for objects. Below are two examples of legitimate use, with the antecedent of *whose* boldfaced in each sentence.

That is the **building** whose owner I was telling you about.

The **apartment** whose terrace you were admiring is now on sale!

7.6 *That* vs. *Who/Whom*

Which is generally used for things and *who/whom* for people, but *that* can also sometimes be used for people, especially when they aren't specific people. For instance:

We seek to help the people that other organizations overlook.

In this sentence, the word *that* refers to *people*. If you insist on *who*, then you have another puzzle on your hands: *who* or *whom*? *Whom* is the one called for, because it is the object of *overlook*. You end up with this:

We seek to help the people whom other organizations overlook.

For some writers, *whom* might feel a little stiff or pedantic. You could write this instead:

We seek to help the people other organizations overlook.

That's fine, too. But it's okay to use *that* in this sentence. In fact, it may make it a little clearer and easier to read. Where it's easy to use *who* for people, use *who*. Where it

isn't, you can consider *that*. People who object to the practice often do it themselves without even noticing.

7.7 *That* vs. *Which*

Many grammar books advise readers to observe distinctions between *that* and *which*. This book will do the same, but with a caveat: regardless of what is written here, you could close this guide and easily find any number of excellent books written by excellent novelists and nonfiction writers who do not consistently observe the distinction outlined below. Especially in business, though, the difference is worth observing, because it helps ensure clarity.

Now, imagine you have a business partner with whom you are having a little disagreement over money. Which of the following statements would you prefer to hear from your partner?

I will give you all the money, which I owe you.
I will give you all the money that I owe you.

Should you ever confront such a situation, you might want to opt for a comma and a *which*. *Which* introduces nonessential information. That doesn't mean the information that follows is irrelevant; it simply means that you could remove the clause *which I owe you* without destroying the integrity of the sentence. The first sentence says essentially, "I will give you all the money. And, oh, by the way, I happen to believe I owe it to you."

The second sentence, on the other hand, means that the speaker will hand over only the money that he feels he owes you. Out of, say, \$1 million, that might be \$2, or it might be \$990,000. The word *that* introduces essential information that cannot be removed without destroying the integrity of the sentence. In this case, it also leaves you financially vulnerable!

For additional discussion of the *that-which* distinction, including punctuation guidance, see [3.2.6: Commas with Relative Clauses](#).

Chapter 8

Sticky Structures

This chapter covers several common problems in sentence structure: misplaced modifiers, dangling modifiers, and parallelism. These are among the more difficult grammatical problems in this book, because to understand them, you need an awareness of the anatomy of diverse sentences. If you find elements of the explanations here confusing, you may want to go back and read or reread earlier chapters before continuing.

8.1 Misplaced Modifiers

The term *modifier* refers simply to a word or phrase that modifies something else in a sentence; for example, an adjective can be a modifier for a noun or pronoun. A misplaced modifier is considered misplaced because it appears too far from the word or words it modifies, thus making the sentence ambiguous or inaccurate. As a general rule, you should place a modifier as close as possible to the sentence element it modifies.

The following example illustrates the confusion that can arise when it is unclear which word a modifier describes.

Beth was told about the decision by Sam's manager.

In this case, the problematic modifier is the prepositional phrase *by Sam's manager*. What does it refer to? Did Sam's manager make a decision, and did someone other than the manager—a person not mentioned in this sentence—tell Beth about it?

Or did Sam's manager tell Beth about a decision made by someone else? Since it is unclear, the sentence needs to be rewritten:

Sam's manager told Beth about the decision.

or

Beth was told about the decision made by Sam's manager.

The adverb *only* is a problematic modifier, frequently placed some distance from the element it modifies. It tends to be dropped in before the verb even when it is modifying an element after the verb.

Read these two sentences aloud:

We only had seven hours to finish the project.

We had only seven hours to finish the project.

Both sentences are understandable, but in workplace writing, try to place *only* right before the element it modifies. *Only* functions as an adverb here and modifies *seven*, which is acting as an adjective. A well-positioned *only* is powerful—and may even emit a satisfying click as it settles into place.

8.2 Dangling Modifiers

Dangling modifiers are cousins of misplaced modifiers, but in this case, the sentence element that the modifier is supposed to be modifying never even makes an appearance in the sentence. For example:

Incorrect

Working through the night, it became impossible to stay awake.

In this case, *working through the night* should modify something—but what? The writer implies a person, but the person never shows up in the sentence. Fortunately, this problem is easily fixed: tuck the element being modified right next to the modifier.

Correct

Working through the night, she found it impossible to stay awake.

Below are two more examples of dangling modifiers (underlined).

Incorrect

Tired of the urban crush, the moment to leave the city had arrived.

An experienced public relations professional, his career began in education.

The problem in the first sentence is that you don't know who is tired of the urban crush; the person goes unmentioned. Similarly in the second sentence, you don't know who the experienced PR professional is. There's a mysterious *his* in there, but you need a noun.

The people described in the underlined phrases must explicitly be mentioned. Here are two simple revisions to undangle the dangling modifiers.

Correct

Tired of the urban crush, he decided it was time to leave the city.

An experienced public relations professional, Ethan began his career in education.

8.3 Parallelism

Parallelism is important for the sake of both grammar and style. The principle of parallelism requires the use of the same grammatical constructions in corresponding phrases or clauses. (For a discussion of parallelism in bulleted lists, see [5.2](#).)

But what does that mean? The following example illustrates a lack of parallelism:

Incorrect

The article is long, confusing, and an insult to my intelligence.

In this example, the items in a series consist of (1) an adjective, *long*, (2) another adjective, *confusing*, and (3) a noun—*insult*—plus modifiers.

To make these grammatical elements parallel, change the part of speech in the third item to match the others:

Correct

The article is long, confusing, and insulting to my intelligence.

Insulting, like the other items in the series, is an adjective.

A common source of parallelism trouble is the expression *as . . . as*. For example:

Incorrect

It is as tall or taller than the Empire State Building.

This is an error because the elements on either side of the coordinating conjunction *or* are not parallel. The sentence sets up *as tall* and *taller* as two alternatives, but you can't actually say *It is as tall . . . than the Empire State Building*. The phrase *as tall* requires another *as* to complete its meaning.

To correct the error, simply add *as* to the sentence:

Correct

It is as tall **as** or taller than the Empire State Building.

The revised version is the correct shorthand equivalent of writing, *It is as tall as the Empire State Building, or it is taller than the Empire State Building*.

A final example of a parallelism problem involves the frequently misused correlative conjunction *not only . . . but also*:

Incorrect

The book was not only boring but also cost too much.

Whenever you use *not only . . . but also*, the grammatical elements linked by the expression should be the same—for instance, two nouns, two predicates, and so on. In the example above, what follows *not only* is an adjective—*boring*—but what follows *but also* is a verb phrase: *cost too much*.

To address the inconsistency, you can switch to two adjectives or opt for two verbs instead.

Correct

The book was not only boring but also expensive.

The book not only bored me but also cost too much.

8.4 Multiple Instances of *And* in a List

Do not be concerned about having more than one *and* in a list. It is extremely common. You do not need to delete one of them (in fact, you typically shouldn't), and you do not need to turn one into an ampersand (in fact, you definitely shouldn't).

Below are three common examples of the lengths to which people will go in order to avoid adjacent instances of *and*. All three are wrong.

Incorrect

Alec ordered chips, calamari, steamed broccoli, macaroni and cheese.

Alec ordered chips, calamari, steamed broccoli, and macaroni & cheese.

Alec ordered chips, calamari, steamed broccoli, as well as macaroni and cheese.

In the first sentence, it sounds as though there are five dishes: (1) chips, (2) calamari, (3) steamed broccoli, (4) macaroni, and (5) cheese. There are only four dishes, however, and the fourth one is the macaroni and cheese. The second sentence tries to sneak in an ampersand for no

reason, whereas the third suddenly switches to *as well as* for no reason other than to avoid doubling up on the *and*.

The first of the corrected options below places two instances of *and* close together with no shame whatsoever. And there is no reason for shame! Those two little words are just doing their job.

Correct

Alec ordered chips, calamari, steamed broccoli, and macaroni and cheese.

Alec ordered chips, calamari, and steamed broccoli as well as macaroni and cheese.

Alec ordered chips, calamari, and steamed broccoli, as well as macaroni and cheese.

The second and third options show two different versions with the phrase *as well as*, one with a comma before the phrase and one without. Both options are acceptable.

Chapter 9

Picking the Right Words and Forms

This chapter covers some common problems with articles (*a* and *an*), word usage mistakes, spelling mistakes, and frequently confused words.

9.1 *A vs. An Before Abbreviations*

English speakers know to use *an* before a word that begins with a vowel, and *a* before a word that begins with a consonant.

a car
an argument
an opinion
a deal

What, however, do you do with these?

a/an SEC employee
a/an FBI agent
a/an UFO

SEC and *FBI* begin with a consonant. But *a SEC employee* sounds wrong. It sounds wrong because the first *sound* you hear when you say *SEC*—*ess ee see*—is a vowel, *e*. Article choice is based on sound, not spelling. The name of a letter of the alphabet is usually different from the sound that the letter makes in a word.

The first sound in *FBI* is also a short *e* sound: *eff*. And the first sound in *UFO*—pronounced *yoo eff oh*—is a consonant: *y*. Thus, the correct article choices are:

an SEC employee
an FBI agent
a UFO

9.2 *Unique*

The widely accepted definition of unique is “one of a kind.” Thus, avoid modifying it with words such as *very*, *quite*, and so on. Many language experts object to sentences such as the following:

The company’s new advertising campaign is very unique.

Why is this phrasing a problem? Because, the argument goes, either something is one of a kind, or it isn’t. It can’t be almost one of a kind, or extremely one of a kind. Even though one often hears *unique* used colloquially in the sense of unusual or remarkable, this usage is not broadly accepted as standard.

More important here is the stylistic issue: the sentence above sounds better and reads more powerfully without the *very*.

The company’s new advertising campaign is unique.

Even better, consider coming up with a more honest and original word, because few things are unique in a meaningful way. Hyperbole is common in business, but perhaps less effective than some people might think.

9.3 Using *i.e.* and *e.g.*

The Latin abbreviation *i.e.* stands for *id est*, meaning “that is.” Then there is *e.g.*, the Latin abbreviation for *exempli gratia*, meaning “for example.” They do not mean the same thing, so do not use them interchangeably.

One way to avoid confusing them is to avoid overusing them, as some people do, to the point that their documents resemble alphabet soup.

Use *i.e.* to introduce a word or group of words roughly equivalent to a preceding word or phrase. In business writing, you often see *i.e.* used before a list of items. It must

be a complete list, however. Below are some examples of correct usage.

Correct

We sent marketing letters to five states, i.e., North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, Montana, and Virginia.

We sent marketing letters to five states (i.e., North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, Montana, and Virginia).

Use *e.g.* when you provide only an example or partial list.

Correct

We sent marketing letters to several states, e.g., North Dakota and Montana.

We sent marketing letters to several states (e.g., North Dakota and Montana).

We sent marketing letters to several states (e.g., North Dakota, Montana).

Below is an example of what befalls people who go overboard with Latin abbreviations.

Incorrect

We sent marketing letters to several states (e.g., North Dakota, Montana, etc.).

In this last sentence, there are two Latin abbreviations within a single set of parentheses. This is not a good way to make your writing more readable, but more important, it is incorrect.

That is because *e.g.* promises only an example or partial list, but *etc.* is an abbreviation substituting for the rest of the list. Thus, all of the several states are represented there, even if they are not explicitly named, and the *e.g.* should actually be an *i.e.*

Don't do it, though! Please back away from the Latin abbreviations! Actual English words—such as *that is* and *for example*—are always available to you.

Where you need to compress text, you are welcome to use *i.e.* and *e.g.* The trick is to use them correctly and to avoid excess.

9.4 Nonwords

In professional writing and speech, avoid nonstandard language such as *irregardless* and *themselves*. Use *regardless* and *themselves* instead.

When you are not sure whether a word you want to use is acceptable, consult a reliable full-size dictionary or good online dictionary. Two excellent and free options are Merriam-Webster.com and ahdictionary.com (from American Heritage).

Many careful editors, even those with a large vocabulary, frequently consult a dictionary. Dictionaries give guidance on far more than just definitions and tend to be full of helpful surprises.

9.5 *Accept* vs. *Except*

Accept and *except* are commonly confused. They sound similar, but they are very different words. The following sentence illustrates correct use of both.

We **accept** all the conditions **except** for the fifth one.

Accept is always a verb. *Except* is a preposition in this case, and *except for the fifth one* is a prepositional phrase.

When *except* is used in combination with *that* (i.e., *except that*), it can also be a conjunction. The following sentences contain additional examples of correct usage.

Accept as Verb

I accept your offer.

The mayor will accept the invitation.

Except as Preposition

Except for yours, all bids came in under \$20,000.

Except That as Conjunction

We agree to your conditions, except that we are not sure we can come up with the deposit by tomorrow.

9.6 *Affect* vs. *Effect*

Affect is usually a verb. *Effect* is usually a noun. Less frequently, however, *effect* can also be a verb, and *affect* can also be a noun. Below are examples to distinguish their various meanings.

Affect as Verb

The rain affected our plans.

Effect as Noun

The weather's effect on our plans was minimal.

Effect as Verb

The committee effected change in the corporate environment.

Affect as Noun

The patient had a flat affect.

A person who has a flat affect does not display emotion. The noun *affect* is not that common outside of psychiatry.

9.7 Commonly Misspelled Words

Grammar and *misspelling* are often misspelled as *grammer* and *mispelling*. Beware!

9.8 *Resume*, *Resumé*, or *Résumé*?

You will see *resume*, *résumé*, and *résumé* floating around the business world. The two preferred versions are the accent-free version and the one with two accents.

I sent in my resume.

The résumé was full of errors.

This book uses *resume*. The *New York Times* uses *résumé*. You can decide your favorite.

Chapter 10

Chronic Sources of Grammar Confusion

This chapter covers topics that are particularly poorly understood by—and rarely resolved for—native English speakers, who often learn the grammar of their mother tongue through osmosis. May the following pages provide some relief!

10.1 Does English Have Subjunctive?

Subjunctive is a relative rarity in English. It is extremely common, however, in languages that native English speakers may have studied. It is often in their foreign language study—for instance, Spanish or French—that they first become aware that subjunctive exists.

The subjunctive appears in English in special cases—for discussions of events or situations that are counterfactual or hypothetical, or where an entity is influencing the actions of another through wish or obligation.

Here is an example of what is known as **present subjunctive** in English:

I insist that he **attend** the meeting.

They recommended that she **refuse** the offer.

In regular present tense, you would normally say *he attends* and *she refuses*, with an *s* ending. Drop the *s* in these two instances and you have the present subjunctive form. It is the influence of *insist* and of *recommended* that triggers the subjunctive in these cases.

Since present-tense verbs include an *s* ending only for *he/she/it*, English speakers don't tend to notice subjunctive forms. The subjunctive verbs just blend into the background with all the other non-subjunctive verbs that don't end in *s* either.

For example, *take* is subjunctive in the sentence below, but it is indistinguishable from the regular first-person present-tense conjugation: also *take*.

He suggested that I **take** more time on the application.

One special case involves *to be*. The subjunctive form *be* appears regularly after statements of wish, influence, etc.

It is critical that they **be** there.

It is important that you **be** there in case I need you.

Another common type of subjunctive is covered in the next section.

10.2. Counterfactual Statements About the Present

Below are two examples of counterfactual statements in the present.

If we **had** more money, we would purchase their lemonade business.

If Sonny **knew** your number, he would call you.

The statements are called *counterfactual* because these things are not currently true. The idea is, you do not have more money, and Sonny does not know your number.

The verbs *had* and *knew* in these examples are often taught to English learners as *past subjunctive*, but the term is misleading and tends to confuse native speakers, so let's continue with *counterfactual* instead. For statements that are counterfactual in the present, the verb form in the *if*-clause is normally the same as the simple past tense. Native speakers tend to form it automatically without even thinking about it.

One case where you shouldn't just use simple past for these situations is a counterfactual statement with *to be*. Use *were* instead.

If I **were** taller, I would make use of the top shelf in my office.

Use *were* rather than the usual past-tense form *was* here because you are not taller. This is a hypothetical statement. It is common to hear this construction with the simple past *was*, but avoid that in formal speech and writing.

The following is not a hypothetical statement, so you wouldn't use subjunctive.

If I **was** at that event, I don't remember it.

It's just simple past. Maybe you were at the event, maybe you weren't; you just don't happen to remember.

10.3 Counterfactual Statements About the Past

Below are three counterfactual statements about the past, all showing appropriate workplace usage.

Correct

If Kat **had eaten** that seafood, she would have regretted it.

If our prices **had been** lower, we would have won the business.

If he **had known** about the deadline, he would have sent in the form for you.

Each *if*-clause above describes something contrary to what actually happened in the past. Kat did not eat the seafood, our prices weren't lower, and the unnamed man did not know about the deadline.

To express this idea, we use what is known as past perfect (e.g., *had eaten*, *had been*) in the *if*-clause, while the next

clause contains *would have* plus a past participle (e.g., *regretted, won, sent*).

You may sometimes hear or see this counterfactual idea expressed differently in the *if*-clause:

Avoid

If Kat **would have eaten** that seafood, she would have regretted it.

If our prices **would have been lower**, we would have won the business.

If he **would have known** about the deadline, he would have sent in the form for you.

Avoid these constructions in workplace writing and speech. They are nonstandard.

10.4 Present Participles vs. Gerunds

Present participles and gerunds look identical, but they are used differently. This section will clarify the two terms and the common usage for each.

A gerund is an *-ing* form of a verb used as a noun.

Gerund

Running can clear your head.

My colleague enjoys **writing**, but I find it difficult.

Those same words are also regularly referred to as *present participles*. When they are present participles, they are usually verbs, as in the examples below. They help show that the subject of the sentence is in the middle of doing something.

Present Participles

Jake is **running** to the meeting.

Our COO is **writing** a management book for a publisher.

You might expect that past participles, which you've seen previously in this book, have a logical relationship with the

similarly named present participles, but they don't.

10.5 Possessives Before Gerunds

Compare these two examples:

I don't approve of **you** helping him.

I don't approve of **your** helping him.

Before gerunds, generally use the possessive, as shown in the second sentence. The first version is common in speech, but it is conventional in formal writing to use the possessive. *Helping* is a gerund—an *-ing* verb acting as a noun—and the object of the prepositional phrase *of*.

If your sentence sounds awkward with a possessive plus a gerund, which it sometimes will, you can always rewrite to avoid the construction. The example above could very easily be something like this instead:

I don't think you should help him.

It now sounds less pedantic and more natural. Grammar problem solved!

10.6 Present Perfect vs. Past Tense

What is the difference between these two examples?

Alberto has lived in Dallas for 17 years.

Alberto lived in Dallas for 17 years.

First, *has lived* is called present perfect, whereas *lived* is past tense, also sometimes referred to as *simple past*. In the first sentence, Alberto still lives in Dallas; in the second, he doesn't. Thus, present perfect is appropriate for an action that began in the past and continues to the present. Past is appropriate for an action that was completed in the past.

In addition, present perfect is used for past events with unspecified timing. Compare the following two sentences.

I ordered office supplies last week.

I have ordered office supplies.

The first is past tense, *ordered*, because the timing (*last week*) appears. In the second, where the timing is unknown, use present perfect: *have ordered*.

10.7 Name That Verb!

The purpose of this section is to provide a handy reference tool to resolve debates you might have with colleagues and co-workers about key verb terminology.

Name That Verb!	
What to Call It	Example
present	Scout tells the truth.
future	Scout will tell the truth.
past	Scout told the truth.
present continuous	Scout is telling the truth.
future continuous	Scout will be telling the truth.
past continuous	Scout was telling the truth.
present perfect	Scout has told the truth.
future perfect	Scout will have told the truth.
past perfect	Scout had told the truth.

Where you see *continuous* in the table above, you can substitute *progressive* if that word is more familiar to you; both terms are in use in classrooms and grammar books. *Present continuous* is just another way to refer to what some people learned as *present progressive*.

Chapter 11

Grammar Superstitions

This chapter addresses things people believe contrary to the weight of expert language opinion and guidance. These grammar superstitions matter because they often get in the way of common sense and effective workplace writing.

11.1 Beginning with *Because*

Many people report having learned in school that they should never begin a sentence with *because*. Some teachers presumably believe this prohibition to be legitimate, though it most certainly is not.

Others may have viewed the prohibition as a practical means to an instructional end, without actually believing it themselves. They may have hoped that someone would come along at a later time to clarify the point.

That later time is here.

Teachers must teach children to avoid sentence fragments—that is, pieces of sentences. And children often begin fragments with *because*. This is a fragment:

Because my fifth-grade teacher said I couldn't begin a sentence with *because*.

This is not a fragment:

Because my fifth-grade teacher said I couldn't begin a sentence with *because*, I have never once tried it.

It is easier to tell a child never to begin a sentence with *because* than it is to tell a child that it is acceptable to begin a sentence with *because* if it is the start of a dependent clause that is then followed by an independent clause, but is unacceptable if the sentence consists of a single dependent clause. (Phew!)

The following is not a complete sentence:

Because I was late.

But this is:

Because I was late, I missed Jean's presentation.

As long as you have a complete sentence, *because* is a grammatically legitimate way to begin a sentence—in all types of business writing. Avoiding this structure at all costs, in fact, creates writing problems as people go through painful word acrobatics to write around something that doesn't need to be written around.

Because is an earnest, hardworking word that has been unfairly vilified.

11.2 Split Infinitives

It is common for people of a certain age to believe that, regardless of the circumstances, you should never, ever split an infinitive. Modern editorial experts disagree.

An infinitive is the plain form of a verb. Infinitives don't reflect tense and don't have to agree with any subject. In English, infinitive verbs begin with the word *to*, as in:

to walk
to audit
to hire
to be
to recognize
to reward

In the following sentence, the verb *to proofread* is an infinitive.

She likes to proofread every email and instant message she sends.

As you can see, *to* and *proofread* appear side by side. Unless there is a stylistic or content-related reason to

separate the *to* from the rest of the verb, you should usually keep the two pieces of an infinitive together.

You will perhaps recognize this famous split infinitive from television:

To boldly go where no man has gone before.

In this case, the adverb *boldly* divides *to* and *go*. But what are the alternatives? *To go boldly where no man has gone before?* *Boldly to go where no man has gone before?* The first alternative strips the phrase of its life; the second sounds silly. Hence, the *Star Trek* split infinitive is justified for stylistic and content-related reasons.

The blanket veto on split infinitives is grounded in grammatical myth from the days when English grammar books drew too heavily on the grammar of a very different language: Latin. The highly esteemed *Chicago Manual of Style* notes: “Although from about 1850 to 1925 many grammarians stated otherwise, it is now widely acknowledged that adverbs sometimes justifiably separate the *to* from the principal verb {they expect *to more than double* their income next year}.”

There is no need to go out of your way to split infinitives. On the other hand, there is no need to go out of your way to *not* split them.

11.3 Ending a Sentence with a Preposition

As with the split-infinitive debate, opposition to ending a sentence with a preposition resulted from misapplications of Latin grammar to English. The argument over this issue began centuries ago and has been perplexing people ever since.

Even Winston Churchill was reportedly criticized for ending sentences with prepositions. His ostensible reply:

“That is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put.”

You may end sentences with prepositions if putting the preposition elsewhere would recreate the grammatical contortions of Churchill’s jest. If it is not essential for the sake of sentence structure, there are often more interesting and elegant ways to end a sentence, but it is unnecessary to struggle as mightily against the concluding preposition as many people do.

For example, suppose you are emailing your colleague about a particular book. There is no reason to avoid a sentence like this one, which ends in a preposition:

That’s the book I was telling you about!

The sentence above is certainly less awkward than the following, which moves the preposition away from the end:

That’s the book about which I was telling you!

In speech, native English speakers constantly place prepositions at the ends of sentences. It is a natural feature of English, a Germanic language, and a natural feature of other Germanic languages, too.

Still, a sentence like this one, which ends in the preposition *of*, should be avoided in writing:

That’s the book I just finished reading the first chapter of.

That’s a problem of awkwardness, though, not of grammar. It is always possible to come up with a less awkward sentence that conveys the same information.

I just finished reading the first chapter of that book.

11.4 Contractions Are Fine

Some people have the impression that contractions are unprofessional, even as they guiltily continue using them in their writing. Stop the pointless guilt!

While it is true that very formal writing contains fewer contractions on average than informal writing, contractions are not prohibited in business writing.

In fact, for the vast majority of documents, contractions are natural and appropriate. *Isn't* and *doesn't* and *didn't* are perfectly fine for business communications. Avoiding them just because you think they are bad can contribute to a stilted, unnatural style.

Conclusion

By minding the grammatical details, business professionals can make their writing (as well as their speech!) clearer, more precise, more professional, and more authoritative. Greater grammatical confidence leads to a stronger writing voice and greater courage to make assertions and communicate your ideas.

An important difference between grammatically knowledgeable people and less grammatically knowledgeable people is often the amount of time they spend looking things up in reliable, authoritative guides. Careful grammarians tend to be looker-uppers.

Therefore, keep using this book, acquire other language books of interest to you, look things up regularly, and retain a healthy grammar humility. Language is full of surprises, and you will find that it changes over your lifetime.

After all, English is now a global language. Or rather, it is global *languages*. What some people call wrong may be in use in another part of the country or in another part of the English-speaking world. There is not always just one right way to do things. Gray areas abound.

If you pay close attention, language will astonish and dazzle you throughout your life. May you enjoy it.

Appendix

Parts of Speech

Noun

<i>Description</i>	Refers to a person, place, thing, or idea
<i>Examples</i>	runner, snow, notebook, thunder, tree, house, mouse, car, sushi, liberty, belief, justice, dishonesty, creativity, crowd, team, committee, Empire State Building, New York
<i>Tips</i>	If you can perceive something through one of your five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch—it is probably a noun. Nouns also include abstract words, such as <i>justice</i> and <i>truth</i> . A proper noun is a type of noun that refers to a specific person, place, etc.

Pronoun

<i>Description</i>	Often refers back to or replaces a noun or another pronoun
<i>Examples</i>	I, we, you, they, he, she, it, which, who, whom, that, these, those, either, one, some, each, everyone, anybody, neither
<i>Tips</i>	Pronouns are kind of like vague nouns.

Verb

<i>Description</i>	Usually describes existence or action
<i>Examples</i>	be, feel, hear, seem, shout, run, talk, walk, would, do, leave, help, occur, receive, recognize, judge, become, observe, annoy
<i>Tips</i>	Verbs can be divided into three main types: action verbs, linking verbs, and auxiliary (helping) verbs. <i>Run</i> is an example of an action verb, <i>be</i> is the most common linking verb, and <i>would</i> and <i>have</i> are examples of auxiliary verbs.

Adjective

<i>Description</i>	Modifies a noun or pronoun
<i>Examples</i>	tall, red, large, lumpy, idealistic, exhausted, grumpy, lovely, inexpensive
<i>Tips</i>	You will often see multiple adjectives in

a row before a noun. Sometimes they will need commas between them (e.g., *a driven, dedicated employee*) and sometimes they won't (e.g., *a driven young employee*).

Adverb

<i>Description</i>	Modifies a verb, an adjective, or another adverb
<i>Examples</i>	swiftly, quickly, extremely, angrily, sadly, quietly, often, very, too, not, never, sometimes, frequently, here
<i>Tips</i>	Many adverbs end in <i>ly</i> , although some <i>ly</i> words—for example, <i>lovely</i> and <i>friendly</i> —are adjectives.

Preposition

<i>Description</i>	Relates two words or phrases to each other
<i>Examples</i>	to, at, from, on, until, for, during, by,

	in, under, over, with, through, throughout, about, before
<i>Tips</i>	Most prepositions are small words. They are usually found at the beginning of a prepositional phrase, such as <i>in the house</i> , <i>by the lake</i> , or <i>through the years</i> .

Conjunction

<i>Description</i>	Links together words or groups of words
<i>Examples</i>	<i>Coordinating:</i> and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet <i>Subordinating:</i> because, since, as, if, so that, unless, although, when <i>Correlative:</i> either/or, neither/nor, not only/but also
<i>Tips</i>	There are three main types of conjunctions: coordinating, subordinating, and correlative. All seven coordinating conjunctions appear above. The lists of subordinating and correlative conjunctions are partial ones.

Interjection

<i>Description</i>	Short utterances or exclamations
<i>Examples</i>	Oh. Hurray! Aha!
<i>Tips</i>	Not particularly relevant for a business environment, at least not in written communications.

About the Author

Ellen Jovin is a co-founder and principal of Syntaxis, a communication skills training firm based in New York City. She has taught business writing, grammar, and email etiquette at companies throughout the United States and in all major industries. Previously she worked as a professional writer specializing in business, finance, and technology. Ellen earned a BA in German studies from Harvard University and an MA in comparative literature from UCLA. She lives in Manhattan with her husband, Brandt Johnson.

About Syntaxis

Syntaxis is a communication skills training firm based in New York City. The company was founded in 1999 by the author of this book, Ellen Jovin, and her husband, Brandt Johnson.

Through workshops and one-on-one coaching, Syntaxis helps people at all stages of their careers, from new hires to CEOs, to communicate with greater clarity, authenticity, and power.

Subject areas include business writing, grammar, email etiquette, editing, presentation skills, executive presence, pitch preparation, and English as a foreign language. All Syntaxis training is delivered by one of the two founders, either Ellen or Brandt. Ellen conducts the training in written communication skills, while Brandt conducts the training in presentation skills and executive presence.

Syntaxis clients include many of the world's leading corporations.

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